

What If Ohio Helped, Instead of Punishing, Its Poorest School Districts?

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What If Ohio Helped, Instead of Punishing, Its Poorest School Districts? When Jackie Evangelista and I discussed this little talk several months ago, we had no idea that the title we agreed upon would be so timely. If, you have been tracking Ohio education news in detail in recent weeks—something that is getting harder to do in these times of the decline of daily local newspapers—you may have read Ohio State Senator Bill Coley’s repeated question at a recent hearing of the Ohio Senate Education Committee: “How much time should we give those who drove the bus into the ditch to get it out?”

The Senate Education Committee was debating the expansion of punitive state takeovers of so-called “failing” school districts, and Senator Coley was doing what is pretty common in Columbus, blaming teachers and school administrators when a school district’s aggregate test scores are low. “How much time should we give those who drove the bus into the ditch to get it out?” What if Ohio helped, instead of punishing, its poorest school districts?

Ohio seems to be determined to punish the poorest schools, their teachers, and the communities they serve. How could the state be supportive instead? What changes in overall policy would make a difference?

If it were the goal of state legislators and the Governor and the Ohio Department of Education really to help the school districts which serve concentrations of our state’s poorest children, there are several things the state could do.

First: The Governor actually proposed one of these forms of assistance in his budget proposal, and the Legislature added some money and enacted the proposal. The idea is to provide state dollars to support wraparound services—right at school—to assist children and families struggling with poverty. The investment for wraparound services that made it into the final biennial budget (for the next two years) is \$625 million, made up of an additional \$275 million next year and \$400 million the following year. The *Plain Dealer’s* Patrick O’Donnell explains the plan: “The Student Wellness and Success Plan, as it is called, is aimed at helping students in every school in Ohio with issues that interfere with learning and with helping them succeed in school and in life.” This includes medical and mental health care, family supports—like assisting with links to needed social services—and mentoring.

The only problem is that once this \$625 million is spread across 610 school districts, \$625 million isn’t really enough to make much of a difference. It is a blanket plan that guarantees something for every school district and is only moderately targeted. O’Donnell explains: “That means \$360 per student for the poorest districts and \$30 for the richest. The minimum that any district would receive also was raised from \$25,000 to \$30,000.” If you think about the cost of hiring staff, this money wouldn’t go very far at all.

Of course, supporting this sort of services is something the state can do—and can fund more generously.

Second: If the state wanted to help the poorest districts, the state could really undertake to fix our very unequal state funding system. A new school funding plan would, we could hope, target more state operating dollars to the school districts that can’t raise enough money locally through local property taxes. The state is, after all, supposed to award more money to school districts which have less capacity to raise money locally. These also tend to be districts where very poor children are segregated. In a new report, Howard Fleeter, an education funding policy wonk in Columbus, explains that the state has not been doing a good job of helping the districts serving concentrations of children living in poverty.

Fleeter explains: “National research indicates that economically disadvantaged students typically cost at least 30% more to educate than do non-disadvantaged students. However... Ohio’s current formula only provides additional funding at less than 20% of the base cost....”

In an appendix to the same report, Fleeter adds that over the past decade, Ohio has systematically underfunded the very school districts that need help from the state: He writes:

- “For much of the past 30+ years, funding for economically disadvantaged students has increased at a far slower rate than the foundation level. Even worse, poverty funding has actually *decreased* by 13% from FY09 to FY18.
- “Since 2001, the rate of increase in the number of low-income students has been nearly 3 times as great as the rate of increase in state funding for these students.”

A core problem is that the state has been cutting taxes for a decade—income taxes, estate taxes, and tangible personal property taxes on inventory and equipment. As a result, the school funding formula has fallen out of whack. It is supposed to award funding according to the cost of educating the number of students in a school—calculated by the cost of their actual needs. When a new proposal was released last spring for revisions to the formula, its sponsors explained that in recent years 503 of the state’s 610 school districts have been either capped at last year’s amount or on guarantee—once again receiving last year’s amount—and the amount they got the year before that and before that. The new **Cupp-Patterson Formula Plan** was released, but it is still being discussed and fixed, because even that formula, according to Fleeter’s very technical analysis, didn’t do enough to support school districts with high concentrations of very poor children. Fleeter shows that it would put more money in the system, but it doesn’t do nearly enough to target the dollars for equity—to help the districts serving children living in impoverished communities.

Not only has Ohio been failing to do the right thing by way of helping the school districts serving poor children, but it has also been aggressively doing the wrong thing. Ohio has been doubling down on a punitive system of accountability for years now.

Instead of being supportive, Ohio punishes its poorest school districts in several ways. Remember Ohio Senator Bill Coley’s question: “How much time should we give those who drove the bus into the ditch to get it out?”

State Takeover

The first, and most draconian, punishment for Ohio’s so-called “failing” school districts is state takeover.

We already have state takeover—passed in the middle of the night without hearings in 2015. Youngstown was seized, then Lorain, and finally this year, East Cleveland. In these districts, a state appointed Academic Distress Commission appoints a CEO to run the district with absolute power to hire and fire and abrogate any labor contract with employees. In these districts the locally elected school board continues to be elected, but its only power is to decide when to put levies on the ballot. Youngstown has not improved its performance on the state tests used as Ohio’s primary measure for school quality. Lorain got a D this year instead of an F, but chaos has ensued in the community. David Hardy, the appointed CEO, has alienated the teachers, the elected board of education, parents, the mayor, the police chief, and members of the Academic Distress Commission which appointed him. Several members of that Commission have quit in protest. East Cleveland is currently in the process of being taken over. Ten additional school districts had been in line for takeover: Columbus, Dayton, Toledo, Canton, Ashtabula, Lima, Mansfield, Painesville, Euclid, and North College Hill—although the recently released school district report cards helped all of them because they earned a D this year rather than an F.

Last spring, passing HB 154 by a spectacular, bipartisan margin of 83/12, the Ohio House voted to eliminate the state takeovers, but the Senate and its Education Committee—in a proposed state budget amendment—came back with a plan that is equally as draconian a plan as the one operating right now in Youngstown and Lorain. The Senate’s plan features appointed Local District Improvement Commissions which report to a State Transformation Board set to perpetuate autocratic rule and push aside locally elected boards of education. The House prevented the Senate’s plan from making it into the Budget, and

the Budget finally included a one-year moratorium on state takeovers. However, the Senate Education Committee has been holding hearings now on the same plan that didn't make it into the budget.

The second form of punitive policy is the massive expansion of vouchers—tucked quietly into the budget bill—to pay private school tuition.

Ohio has five forms of vouchers—the original Cleveland Voucher Program, Autism Vouchers, Peterson Special Education Vouchers, and two forms of plain old statewide vouchers. These two last plain old voucher plans are what got expanded in the fine print of the budget.

The first of these is EdChoice Vouchers for students living in the zone of a so-called “failing” school. Students with EdChoice Vouchers have their voucher deducted from the budget of the local school district. Sometimes, the vouchers are worth more than the school district's state aid, which means local school districts have to use local levy dollars to pay for the vouchers. It used to be that to qualify for a voucher, a student had to be enrolled in a public school when he or she applied for the voucher. Kindergarteners were the only exception. But the new state budget changed the law. The Ohio Association of School Business Officials reported in August that the budget as passed provides that, “students going into grades 9-12 need not first attend a public school. In other words, high school students already attending a private school can obtain a voucher.” This September, in some school districts hundreds of students already in religious school have come forward to claim an EdChoice voucher for the tuition that their parents paid for last year.

The second of the plain old statewide vouchers is called EdChoice Expansion. These vouchers can be claimed by students anywhere in the state as long as the family qualifies as low-income. EdChoice Expansion vouchers are paid for entirely by the state, but their number was expanded exponentially in the new budget. Now, according to a new report from Innovation Ohio, “families of four earning up to \$103,000 can qualify for a \$3,000 voucher to offset private school tuition for each of their children.” EdChoice Expansion is capped at 60,000 vouchers, but can grow 5% each time 90% of the vouchers are claimed.

The new Innovation Ohio report explains that between 2002 and today: “The state has chosen to increase its investment of taxpayer money in private, mostly religious schools by 428%... while at the same time only delivering a 12% increase in state per pupil investment in public school districts.”

The first two punitive strategies are the state takeovers and the expansion of vouchers at public expense. The third is the annual release of state report cards for school districts. The state report cards rate school districts and individual schools with the rating largely based on aggregate standardized test scores.

I have given you a handout created two weeks ago by Rich Exner, the data wonk for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. I am passing out the handout because, sadly, this report and the bar graphs it displays never made it into the newspaper itself; they only appeared online at *Cleveland.com*. I suspect many of you may have missed this stunning critique of the state report cards. The headline on Exner's report reads: “See how closely Ohio school report card grades trend with district income.” What Exner exposes is an almost perfect correlation of the report cards' overall grades and each of their components with the school district's aggregate family income. Wealthy school districts with highly educated parents got A grades and schools serving the poorest students got F grades.

The academic research has been exposing the correlation of standardized test scores with family and neighborhood income for decades. Just last week, Sean Reardon of Stanford University released a report based on an enormous analysis of millions of test score grades across the state, and what he found again is just what Exner exposes: aggregate standardized test scores are not a good measure of the quality of schools and teachers. They measure the overall income of the community. Low test scores virtually always correlate with concentrated poverty. Racially segregated school districts tend to have overall low scores, but, writes Reardon, “Once we account for racial differences in school poverty..., however, racial

composition differences among schools are no longer positively and significantly associated with the grade 3 achievement gap ... or gap growth.... Differences in exposure to school poverty, however, are strongly associated with gaps in grade 3 and modestly associated with gap growth....” “Racial segregation matters, therefore, because it concentrates black and Hispanic students in high-poverty schools, not because of the racial composition of their schools, per se.”

How does family and neighborhood poverty affect a school? In an excellent (2010) book, *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*, Anthony Bryk and the Consortium on Chicago School Research, examined essential supports that would be necessary in 46 “truly disadvantaged” schools in Chicago, the poorest schools in a school district where many schools are troubled with poverty. The families these schools serve are 96 percent low income: 64 percent of adult males in these families are unemployed; the median family income is \$9,480; and the percentage of families living below the poverty line is 70 percent. Bryk and his colleagues prescribe strategies for improving the schools that serve children in such neighborhoods, but they point out that realistically, “At both the classroom and the school level, the good efforts of even the best educators are likely to be seriously taxed when confronted with a high density of students who are in foster care, homeless, neglected, abused...” (*Organizing Schools for Improvement*, p. 173)

Here are just a few facts about child poverty across the United States from reports released earlier this month from national child welfare organizations.

From the Center for Law and Social Policy: “Child poverty (ages 0-18) and young adult poverty (ages 18-24) remained unacceptably high at 16.2 percent and 15 percent respectively with alarmingly large racial and ethnic disparities in poverty. Young children, under age 5, remain the poorest of all, at 17.7 percent....” “Racial disparities are persistent, stark, and caused by structural factors.” Despite high levels of work among their families,” 29.5 percent of Black children are poor and 23.7 percent of Hispanic children are poor—compared to 8.9 percent of non-Hispanic white children.

But we read that employment numbers are improving. Shouldn’t that improve the situation for families? The Center for Law and Social Policy reports relatively high levels of employment among families with poor children, but problems with the kind of work available, the wages, and the conditions: “More than two-thirds of poor children (70.3 percent) live in households with at least one worker. Low wages, inadequate hours, and underemployment mean that work still does not pay a family-sustaining wage for millions of households. While unemployment remains near historical lows, a substantial share of low-income workers are employed part time involuntarily, meaning they would prefer to be working full time but are unable to find full-time work or get sufficient hours from their employer. Low-wage jobs predominate in the fastest-growing sectors, such as retail and food service. Such jobs are characterized by few benefits; unstable and unpredictable schedules; and temporary or part-time status.”

Then there are the numbers from First Focus on Children about the services that are missing for many children:

- “Almost 80 percent of eligible 3-5 year old children lack access to Head Start programs.
- “The Federal Government is not fulfilling 55 percent of its funding commitment for Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) grants.
- “Of the households on the waiting list for housing assistance, 60 percent are families with children.
- “75 percent of poor families in the U.S. who are eligible for cash assistance do not receive it.
- “Nearly 83 percent of children who receive free or reduced price lunch during the school year do not have access to the summer meals program.”

Daniel Koretz, the Harvard University expert on the construction and uses of standardized testing explains why Ohio should not be using standardized testing to evaluate schools as the basis of the state report cards, and incidentally why Congress should abandon the test-based accountability strategy that

was cast into federal law in the No Child Left Behind Act. Koretz explains that school districts serving primarily privileged students and school districts serving concentrations of poor children cannot be held to the same timelines for meeting specific standards.

Koretz explains: “One aspect of the great inequity of the American educational system is that disadvantaged kids tend to be clustered in the same schools. The causes are complex, but the result is simple: some schools have far lower average scores. Therefore, if one requires that all students must hit the proficient target by a certain date, these low-scoring schools will face far more demanding targets for gains than other schools do. This was not an accidental byproduct of the notion that ‘all children can learn to a high level.’ It was a deliberate and prominent part of many of the test-based accountability reforms. Unfortunately, it seems that no one asked for evidence that these ambitious targets for gains were realistic.” (pp. 129-130) Test-based accountability was designed to be punitive. The goal was to make teachers work harder and smarter for fear of the consequences for their schools.

Begin Conclusion It’s time to begin winding down these remarks. So we should ask again: What should Ohio be doing to support, rather than punish Ohio’s poorest schools?

Ohio needs to provide ample and targeted funding for what is Governor Mike DeWine’s good idea—help for school districts to provide wraparound health and social services right at school for children and families in need. The legislature also needs to ensure that the school funding formula accommodates the needs of school districts serving masses of children in poverty. And Ohio needs to abandon its punitive state takeovers and privatization schemes at the expense of democratically governed public school districts. And we need to get rid of the state report cards for schools and school districts.

Before I close, I invite you to travel with me to a prototype of the kind of school Governor DeWine may be thinking about when he talks about a school with wraparound services. There are, in Cincinnati, many schools that emulate this model to varying degrees. The school I visited is one of the best-known models in the country. There is a lot of variation in how much support such schools provide and how they are operated, which depends a lot on how the partnerships are set up and the quality of the school’s leadership.

In the model wraparound school I visited, in the Washington Heights neighborhood in New York City, the school had a principal and also a director of the added services, who was parallel to the principal. This person coordinated federal funding from Medicaid, Head Start, a 21st Century After School Program, and other available services for job training for parents. She had also secured some philanthropic grants. She also coordinated collaboration between the academic and the wraparound services staff.

Visitors like the group I was part of were greeted in a room used for parent education programs—English as a Second Language and various job training classes. There were huge commercial sewing machines there, for example. We visited the early Head Start (for toddlers) right in the building. We also visited the Head Start classes for preschoolers located there. Again, housed right in the school building, we visited the dental clinic, where a child was having a tooth filled. We visited a medical clinic, where students receive vaccinations, where they have eye exams, and, where someone checks sick children for strep throat and ear infections. We stood outside the room used for the mental health clinic, where both children and parents can get help. We visited a huge afterschool program where some children were engaged in folk dancing, and others were cooking with ingredients they had gathered in a huge school garden, funded by a grant from the Bette Midler Foundation. A big percentage of the children in the school participate every summer in a summer enrichment day camp. All this was in addition to a well-staffed academic program, where class size is reasonable.

This school is a traditional public school—New York City Public School 5. I could feel the way this school and the staff I met—teachers and medical and social service personnel alike—embraced the children, their families and the community. It was a cold winter day, and we had to walk quite a distance

from the subway to get to the school, but inside, the atmosphere was warm and sunny. Parents were around in the hallways, and it all felt very welcoming.

The bar graphs produced by the *Plain Dealer*'s Rich Exner clearly show that child poverty is a primary factor when a school's or a school district's aggregate test scores lag. Policymakers here in Ohio, across many states, and at the federal level, however, impose punishments on low-scoring schools instead of providing desperately needed assistance.

I suppose policymakers imagine that if they shift the blame onto teachers, nobody will notice that they are themselves failing to invest the resources and power of government in equitable school funding and in programs to support the needs of the poorest children. A commenter on my blog recently wrote: "Maybe we should consider the possibility... that policymakers have been the people driving the bus and running the show and, in fact, it is time to acknowledge that the wrong people have been running the show and that these "wrong" people have been the elected officials who consistently ignore the research in order to maintain the legitimacy of a failed system of school reform."