

*Educ. - Private School Choice*

# Ohio Paying Some Tuition for Religious School Students

By **KIMBERLY J. McLARIN**

CLEVELAND, Aug. 27 — Delvland and Charlynn Shakespeare both attended the Cleveland public schools and they are determined that their sons will not do the same. They remember unruly students, uninterested teachers and security guards who could most reliably be found in the parking lot smoking pot. That was a decade ago. And things have only gotten worse, Mr. Shakespeare said.

"We disagree with a lot of things going on in the Cleveland schools," said Mr. Shakespeare, 29, a cook. "It's not the type of atmosphere we want our child in."

Last year the Shakespeares scraped together enough money to send their 7-year-old son, Landel, to Our Lady of Peace, a Roman Catholic school for kindergarten through eighth grade. But this year, the bulk of that financial burden is being assumed by the taxpayers of Ohio. The Shakespeares will receive four checks totaling \$1,648 and will have to pay only the remaining \$172 of the school's tuition.

As public and private schools begin opening around the country, Ohio becomes the first state to give parents government-issued vouchers that they can use to pay tuition at their children's religious schools. The country's only other voucher program, in Milwaukee, has so far been limited to nonreligious private schools.

The issue of vouchers has become a focal point of education debate for many conservative politicians and some urban parents. Bob Dole has even made it one of the central themes of his Presidential campaign. When Mr. Dole visited Cleveland this summer, Mr. Shakespeare was one of the parents he met and later mentioned in his speeches promoting vouchers.

Mr. Dole is proposing a \$2.5 billion Federal plan that would give low- and middle-income parents government-issued vouchers of \$1,000 to \$1,500. The parents could use the vouchers to send their children to whatever school they wished, parochial or otherwise. President Clinton opposes using public money for private schools.

In Cleveland, the parents of more than 6,000 children applied for vouchers that can be used by students in the first through third grades who are chosen by lottery. About a third of the applicants, like the Shakespeares, were already sending their children to private schools.

The vouchers are worth up to \$2,500 and will follow the students through the eighth grade. Parents must pay 10 percent or 25 percent of the tuition, depending upon family income. Tuitions at the 48 participating schools range from \$710 to \$3,840.

## A Closer Look at Vouchers

Using public money to pay tuition at private schools has become a central part of the movement to increase school choice. Below is a comparison of voucher programs in Cleveland — the nation's only school system where state money can be used to

pay tuition at private religious schools — and in Milwaukee, the nation's oldest voucher program. Bob Dole, the Republican candidate for President, has made vouchers the centerpiece of his education plan.

	CLEVELAND (1996)	MILWAUKEE (1990)	BOB DOLE'S PLAN
<b>WHO</b>	Up to 2,000 low- and moderate-income students, grades K-3; about 6,000 applications received. Students may use vouchers through the eighth grade.	Court recently expanded program to allow up to 15,000 low-income students or 15 percent of Milwaukee's public school students, grades K-12, to participate. About 1,900 applications this year.	Up to 4 million students, grades 1-12, in low- and middle-income families. Vouchers could be used to attend any private school, including religious ones.
<b>WHAT</b>	\$2,500 or 90 percent (whichever is less) of tuition at private schools, including religious ones. So far 49 private schools are participating; 39 are religious schools.	About \$4,400 this year, the equivalent of state's per-pupil cost in public schools. So far 21 private schools expected to participate. For the second school year, private donors hope to provide half-scholarships to students for religious schools. This year's goal is \$4 million.	Families would receive \$1,000 a year in tuition for students grades 1-8, and \$1,500 a year for high school students. Would be a four-year pilot program.
<b>COST</b>	\$5.2 million for a two-year pilot program.	In school year 1995-96, \$4.6 million was spent by state.	About \$2.5 billion a year in Federal money, matched by money from up to 15 states.

Sources: Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program; Wisconsin Department of Education; Partners Advancing Values in Education

A lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the Cleveland program is pending before the Ohio Court of Appeals. But earlier this month a judge denied a request to halt the program pending that appeal. That decision cleared the way for the program to begin. Most students began attending private school classes on Monday; Cleveland's public schools open on Wednesday.

Both the lawsuit and the injunction request were filed by a coalition of voucher opponents led by the Ohio Federation of Teachers and the American Civil Liberties Union. Donald Mooney, the group's lawyer, said the coalition must now wait for the appeals court to rule on the program's constitutionality. That decision is unlikely to come before next spring, Mr. Mooney said.

"We're disappointed that they are going to divert \$5 million from public schools in desperate need of support to pay for religious education," he said.

No one disputes that Cleveland's schools are in desperate condition.

Last year a Federal judge placed the 70,000-student system under state receivership after it ran out of money halfway through the year. Cleveland schools are plagued by a staggering \$180 million debt, dismal

student achievement and deteriorating buildings — last year the ceiling of one school collapsed just half an hour before students were to be in their seats. This spring, a Federal judge ended court-ordered busing for the school system, which is 70 percent black.

What's more, the system has been stymied by a stubborn refusal on the part of taxpayers to increase financing. Cleveland voters have not approved an increase in school spending in more than a decade. Next week the system faces a potential strike by the 5,000-member teachers union.

Even ardent public school supporters measure their words carefully.

"It depends on what you mean by happy," said Judy Simpson, when asked if she was pleased with the Cleveland schools. Ms. Simpson is a member of the district community council, an advisory group to the superintendent and she insists that vigilant, involved parents can find within the system a good education for their children. She believes she has been able to accomplish that for both her children. Her oldest son now attends Ohio State University; her youngest enters the second grade on Wednesday.

Still, Ms. Simpson admits that supplies are short and some buildings

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are in less than perfect shape.

"It rains in the schools and some have bad floors," Ms. Simpson said. "I'm not saying the buildings are the best."

But voucher opponents and voucher supporters disagree about what to do to improve the failing system. Voucher opponents say the program, which will cost \$5.2 million over two years, will drain badly needed money and the best students from the Cleveland schools without doing anything to improve the system.

"It allows them to escape the problem, but it doesn't solve the problem for 70,000 other kids," said Ron Mercec, president of the Ohio Federation of Teachers.

Opponents also argue that the idea presents an unacceptable breach of the separation between church and state.

"Whatever happened to the Constitution?" Mrs. Simpson said. "If you want to send your child to private school, fine, make the sacrifices. The Cleveland schools should not have to pay for that on the back of my child."

But voucher supporters contend that forcing the public schools to compete for students will make them better.

Dorothy Basemore, whose daughter Sirena Hardimon, 8, is attending Our Lady of Peace on a voucher, said a city that could find \$300 million to build a new professional sports center should be able to find enough money to support its public schools and help parents who want to escape them.

"They can find money for everything else, but not for this?" Ms. Basemore said. "I'm sorry, but to me you need to get a budget."

Rita Moore, whose daughter was not chosen for a voucher, feels the same way.

Ms. Moore said her daughter, who will be in third grade this fall, had computers in the classroom in the first and second grades. But this year, because of budget cuts, the computer class is gone.

"The schools are really going downhill," said Ms. Moore, who did not receive a voucher in the lottery process and is contemplating a move to the suburbs. "You'd like to get out if you could."

As school began this week, administrators of the voucher program were busy with last-minute glitches. On Monday program directors sent taxis (paid for through the public school's transportation budget) to pick up nearly 1,000 students and transport them to school. Bert Holt, the program administrator, said that more than half of the students would eventually walk to school, but that transportation would be made available to every child who needed it.

A more pressing problem may be finding space for those children. Program officials hoped to enroll as many as 54 schools in the program, but several new schools that were expected to open in time for the school year did not. Of the 2,000 vouchers awarded, just over 1,700 were being used today. The parents of the remaining children were still searching for spots.

Although the vouchers were offered to public school systems in the suburbs surrounding Cleveland, not one of those systems chose to participate.

"Everybody boycotted us," Mr. Shakespeare said.

A group called Hope for Cleveland's Schools, which lobbied for the legislation establishing the voucher program, opens two new schools on Wednesday and plans to open more this year. The group has already enrolled 350 students.

Ann Yarman, director of the Hope program, said the schools met all state requirements and had applied to the state for a charter.

The Shakespeares say they like the values, rules, discipline and attention their son Landel receives at Our Lady of Peace, where he is a straight-A student. The couple hopes to send Isaiah, 4, to the same school when he is ready.

The Shakespeares stood outside the graceful, brown-brick building today, chatting with other parents as they all waited for their children to end their first day of school.

Less than a quarter of a mile away stands the Harvey Rice Elementary School, showing signs of neglect. Broken screens hang from the windows. In some of the classrooms, paint peels from the walls as teachers prepare for another school year.

Mr. Shakespeare said he wished vouchers could be made available to every parent who wanted one. Short of that, he hopes the program will improve things for those students who remain in the public schools. But the fact that such improvements will not take place overnight does not invalidate the program's worth, he said.

"If you have a starving child in Africa and you can't feed all of them," he said, "does that mean that you don't feed any?"

## Saying No to Private Schools at Public Cost

WASHINGTON, Aug. 27 (AP) — Most Americans say parents should not be able to send their children to private schools at public expense, and they do not want tax dollars to be used to support religious and private schools, a poll released today has found.

The Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll says the public rejects, 61 percent to 36 percent, the idea of letting students and their parents choose a private school at public expense.

A smaller majority, 54 percent, opposes the idea of a voucher system that would allow parents to choose a public, private or church-related school with the government paying all or part of the tuition.

Critics said the poll distorts Americans' views about public versus private education, a topic that has divided the Democratic and Republican Presidential camps. Such critics say that if more probing questions were asked, the poll would have uncovered dissatisfaction with public schools.

Bob Dole, the Republican nominee, supports vouchers, tax-backed coupons that parents can use to send

their children to a public, private or parochial school of their choice.

President Clinton embraces the idea of giving parents more choice among public schools, but he draws the line at passing out vouchers for private or religious schools.

"It shows that the public knows it's dead wrong to take taxpayer dollars out of public education," Education Secretary Richard W. Riley said about the poll. "The parents of public school students and the American people as a whole rejected vouchers by wide margins."

But Jeanne Allen, director of the nonprofit, pro-voucher Center for Education Reform, complained that some poll questions included "loaded phrases" like whether parents should be able to choose a private school at "public expense."

Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll surveyed 1,329 adults by telephone in May. The margin of sampling error was about three percentage points for responses involving the entire sample.

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