

Ohio Senate school funding proposal needs to be more equitable: editorial

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By Editorial Board, cleveland.com and The Plain Dealer

The Ohio Senate is poised to pass a two-year state budget plan that fails to fully address Ohio's school funding mess -- but there's still time to make it fairer.

The Senate plan would boost state General Revenue Fund spending on kindergarten-through-12th-grade schooling from an estimated \$7.9 billion this fiscal year to about \$8.14 billion for the fiscal year that will begin July 1, then to \$8.29 billion in mid-2022. The comparable House proposals are similar – to \$8.15 billion, then \$8.28 billion.

But those numbers, big and similar as they are, obscure a stark fact: The Senate version would fail to enact the bipartisan, educator-backed Fair School Funding Plan first proposed by Rep. Robert Cupp, a Lima Republican, now the House's speaker, and former Rep. John Patterson, a Jefferson Democrat.

The Cupp-Patterson plan would assure school funding equity. The Senate counteroffer doesn't. It postpones a nearly inevitable day of reckoning when another school funding lawsuit, like the DeRolph case decided in 1997, determines legislators aren't doing right by public school pupils.

The Senate says it's just being frugal but the numbers belie that. Its proposal would add to inequities in school funding while perpetuating divisions over something that should unite Ohioans of all political stripes -- the need to invest in our children.

The Ohio House version of the budget, which includes the Cupp-Patterson innovations, passed on a strikingly bipartisan 70-27 House vote. Tellingly, as now written, the Senate plan is not likely to achieve the same broad political backing, largely because it discards the balance the House achieved.

The Senate plan, for instance, vastly expands eligibility for tax-funded school vouchers. Vouchers help parents pay for private schools. But the Ohio Constitution, which legislators swear to uphold, requires the General Assembly to "secure a thorough and efficient system of common schools throughout the state." That is, public schools are the legislature's first responsibility.

Committee testimony by backers of the House's approach pointed out that the Senate plan raises the ceiling on EdChoice voucher awards for pupils from kindergarten to 8th grade to \$5,500 (from the current \$4,650) and for pupils in grades 9-12 to \$7,500 (from

the current \$6,000 ceiling). Legislative analysts estimate the higher ceilings will cost the state \$163.5 million over two years.

Yes, in fairness, the Senate bill, like the House bill, requires the state to pay pupils' voucher or community (charter) school costs directly, rather than, as now, make school districts fund them. But either way, more tax money will flow to nonpublic schools.

In contrast to the new \$7,500 voucher ceiling for grades 9-12, the Senate bill sets the statewide base cost per public school pupil at \$6,110. (The House plan would calculate a specific base cost for each district, with the statewide average estimated to be \$7,020.)

Then there are the Senate's expanded tax cuts, which could run afoul of requirements in federal COVID-19 stimulus aid not to use the money as an offset for tax cuts. The Senate proposes to expand a 2% House-proposed income tax cut to 5% by the second year, resulting in an estimated \$874 million state revenue loss over the next two years.

Research commissioned by Policy Matters Ohio, the public policy research group, indicates that, for an Ohioan with an annual income from \$41,000 to \$64,000, the Senate plan would save an average of \$22 a year (43 cents a week).

Spending \$874 million on schools would be an investment. Dribbling it away on individually puny tax cuts is a stunt. A reckless stunt, given that it could imperil needed COVID relief dollars. And an irresponsible stunt, in light of the pressing state spending needs made apparent during the pandemic, that include bringing the state jobless-benefits system into the 21st century and repairing and reforming the grossly underfunded Ohio Department of Health.

Commendably, Senate Republicans' budget rewrite does reinstate \$650 million of a \$1.1 billion plan sought by Gov. Mike DeWine for "student wellness and success funding" to help address pupils' nonacademic needs throughout Ohio -- funding whose importance has been magnified by pandemic disruptions to education. The House didn't support DeWine on that. Also commendably, Senate Republicans set public libraries' share of state tax collections at 1.7% for the biennium. DeWine and the House wanted to set libraries' share at 1.66%.

The Senate's likely approval of its proposal will lead to a Senate-House conference committee to write a compromise before July 1. Conferees' priority should be writing a budget that shelves dubious tax cuts and fairly funds public schools -- which, as it now stands, the Senate's proposal doesn't do.