**Where do Ohio’s children receive their education?**

**A Review of Public, Private, and Charter School Use in Ohio’s 88 Counties**

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Education is fundamental in our democracy. Every state constitution has a provision for that state to operate and fund a system of public education in order to guarantee universal access to education.

Ohio youth, however, have multiple options beyond the 610 public school districts and 49 joint vocational districts in the public system. Funding is not mandated by the Constitution for these education sources, but legislation over the last 25 years has resulted in the use of public funds for tuition to chartered private schools and charter schools, and tax credits for home schooling.

Most of Ohio’s K-12 students attend a public school operated by a public school district. The Ohio Department of Education (ODE) collects enrollment data on multiple education sources, and reports it on the ODE website. The most recent data for private education is for 2022-23. The other options are for the 2021-22 school year. Based on that data, this is what enrollment looks like in Ohio.

**Table 1: K-12 Education Sources**

Public school districts 1,498,628

Chartered nonpublic 169,762

Charter schools 111,754

Home schooled 47,819

Joint Vocational 45,304

STEM Schools 3,714

State Supported 534

This analysis focuses on the number of students enrolled in three options: public school districts, chartered private schools, and charter schools. These are the largest categories, and all are funded in the same line item in the state budget. They are in direct competition for state foundation funds.

The Appendix includes a chart that rank orders Ohio’s 88 counties by the number of students enrolled in a school district public school. It also reports for each county, the enrollment numbers for private and charter schools, and the number of private schools. This data makes it possible to see the role each of these options plays in each county. Enrollment in each source is grouped into four size categories that are color-coded. They are displayed on three maps found in the appendix.

Both public school districts and Joint Vocational School (JVS) districts are publicly funded, regulated, and accountable to locally elected school boards. They are public schools. This analysis focuses specifically on the enrollment in public school district schools only.

In 1997 the legislature created a new education category: a charter school. Nonprofit and for-profit organizations can sponsor a school or multiple schools, and operate them without oversight by an elected board of education. The state imposes few regulations on these schools. All students who are accepted by the charter school - or community school as they are called in Ohio - are funded by the state with a tuition scholarship. According to a report by the Legislative Service Commission, in FY 2022 the state spent $1 billion on 111,754 charter school students. The Ohio Department of Education defines charter school students as a subgroup of public education students, but charter schools operate without most mandates required of public schools operated by a school district.

State education laws also allow students to attend chartered nonpublic schools or to be taught by a parent at home, an option that is granted by the local public district. Chartered nonpublic schools, referred to as private schools in this study, operate with approval by the Ohio Department of Education, and earn this status by being accredited or by promising “to provide a high-quality general education.” Religious education is acceptable and so is participation in the state funded voucher programs. They operate with minimal state monitoring or oversight.

Public funds for private school tuition are now available through five different voucher programs. Not all chartered nonpublic schools accept vouchers and not all children are eligible to use them. Each program has eligibility criteria. The requirements have been relaxed over time. To access a voucher an eligible student must be accepted by a participating private school, and then apply to the ODE for a voucher. According to the Legislative Service Commission report on school choice programs, about 75,000 students, nearly 45% of private school students, received a voucher in 2021-22 at a cost of $553.4 million.

The legislature continues to use the state budget and free-standing legislation to increase the use of public funds for private education. HB 11 and SB 11 introduced in 2023 would expand private choices to more students, to a new category of private school, and create a new tool, education savings accounts. The state budget proposed by the Governor would make EdChoice vouchers available to households whose income is up to 400% of poverty and the House budget raises that to 450%. Whatever the vehicle, if any option is approved it will increase state expenditures for private education and conflict with the state’s primary funding responsibility: a system of public schools.

**Why Analyze the Data**

Countywide enrollment data for public schools, private education, and charter schools is available for each of Ohio’s 88 counties on the Ohio Department of Education’s website “Reports Portal.”

Ohio is a diverse state and this data makes it possible to see the role each of these education options plays in different parts of the state, and where policy changes will have the most impact. Because state legislative districts are better aligned with county boundaries than with school district boundaries, this data can help identify for each legislative district what options exist, and the impact on students and public schools of expanding funds for private education.

**Public School Enrollment**

I rank ordered counties by the size of the enrollment in traditional public school districts, and grouped them in 12 size intervals using the 2021-22 school year data. To facilitate easy comparisons, I condensed this into four larger categories. I used this data to create Map 1.

**Table 2: Public School Enrollment by County – 2021-22 School Year**

**# Students/County # of Counties**

1-2000 5

2,001- 4,000 8

4,001- 6,000 18

6,001- 8,000 15

8,001-10,000 9

10,001-15,000 9

15,001- 25,000 8

25,001- 35,000 6

35,001- 45,000 2

45,001- 60,000 3

60,000- 80,000 2

100,000+ 3

**Table 3: Public School Enrollment by County – 2021-22 School Year**

**Enrollment Band - # of Counties**

**# Public School Students**

1,600 - 8,000 46

8,001 - 15,000 18

15,100 – 50,000 16

50,000 – 196,000 8

Total Counties 88

Observations:

1. There are dramatic differences by county in the number of students enrolled in Ohio’s public schools. County wide enrollment ranges between as few as 1,690 students in Noble and Morgan counties, and close to 170,000 in Franklin County. Enrollment in the largest county is about 100 times that of the smallest.
2. There are 8 counties with more than 50,000 students. Together they account for 46% of all the public school students in the state. Ohio’s 6 largest cities – Columbus, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Akron, Dayton, and Toledo are located in these urban counties, as are Canton (Stark County) and Hamilton (Butler County), the state’s 8th and 10th largest Ohio cities.
3. While most Ohio public school students attend school in the 8 largest counties, most Ohio counties are rural and are characterized by a small number of students. 46 of Ohio’s 88 counties – more than half of all counties in Ohio, have between 1,600 and 8,000 students, and 9 more have fewer than 10,000 students. There are 25 counties with between 10,000 and 45,000 public school students.

**Charter School Use**

Charter schools, also known as community schools, began as a pilot project in Lucas County in 1998. They now exist as brick and mortar or on-line schools. Some are chartered by public school districts, but most sponsoring organizations are not public entities. Many are managed by for-profit corporations. Advocates for charter schools, like supporters of vouchers, insisted that because of test performance urban public schools were failing and students needed an alternative at public expense. Based on this misuse of test scores, they chose a rescue plan for a few students without addressing needs of the students whose education they criticized.

Most of the charter schools that have come and gone over the last 25 years have been located in counties with urban centers and concentrated poverty, the primary predictor of test scores. Charter school enrollment state wide in 2021-22 was 111,754.

I used enrollment numbers from the Ohio Department of Education to rank order charter school use by county, and then created four categories of use. The distribution is shown on Map 2.

**Table 4: Charter School Enrollment by County – 2021-22 School Year**

*Source: ODE Reports Portal, Charter School Students 2022*

**# Charter school # Counties**

**Students/county**

0– 400 71

401 – 1,000 6

1,001 – 9,000 8

20,000 – 25,000 3

Total 88

Observations about Charter School Enrollment

1. Charter schools are not relevant in most Ohio counties. 93% of charter school students live in 11 counties. There are none in 57 counties, fewer than 400 charter students in 15 counties, and between 401 and 1,000 in 6 counties.
2. Charter school students are concentrated in three urban counties: Cuyahoga, Franklin, and Lucas. Each has between 22,000 and 25,000 charter students and combined they account for 64% of the charter school students in Ohio.
3. Another 29% of charter school students are found in 8 counties where charter school enrollment is greater than 1,000 but less than 9,000. This includes 4 counties with large urban districts: Hamilton, Montgomery, Summit and Stark, and four other smaller counties: Marion, Richland, Lorain, and Mahoning. Together they enroll 32,762 charter school students.

**Chartered Private Schools**

According to ODE data for the 2022-23 school year, about 169,000 students attend a chartered private school in Ohio. Access to private education is neither universal nor uniform across the state. Private schools, unlike public schools, can accept or reject an applicant. For some students the cost may discourage seeking this option. Nearly every private school is religious and caters to a specific population**. In many places there are not enough people to make it efficient or feasible to operate a private school so there aren’t any private schools to attend.**

I rank ordered counties by the number of students enrolled in chartered nonpublic schools, using data from the ODE website “Reports Portal” for 2022-23 school year, and grouped them into four categories based on size. The distribution is arrayed on Map 3. I also collected for each county the number of chartered private schools in each county. There are a total of 714 chartered private schools.

**Table 5: Private School Enrollment by County – 2022-23 School Year**

**# Private Students/County # Counties**

0-405 49

406-1,000 16

1,000-5,000 17

9,000-32,400 6

Total 88

**Table 6: Number of Chartered Private Schools by County – 2022-23 School Year**

# Private Schools/County # Counties

0-4 60

5-10 16

11-20 6

21-121 6

Total 88

Observations:

1. Like public school enrollment, private school numbers vary widely across the state. The likelihood of there being a private school increases with the size of public school enrollment. More than half of Ohio’s 88 counties are rural, and private school options are limited.

There are 11 counties without any private school students or schools.

1. Private school enrollment numbers are significantly smaller than public school numbers in the 77 counties where there are private schools. Private enrollment ranges between 26 students in Athens County and 32,315 in Cuyahoga County.
2. Most of the public school population is concentrated in Ohio’s 8 largest urban counties, and so is the private school population. The 8 largest counties have 46% of the public school population and 71% of private school students. The 443 private schools in these 8 counties account for 62% of the chartered nonpublic schools in the state. For these 8 counties, the number of students enrolled per county ranges between 3,175 in Stark County and 32,000 in Cuyahoga.
3. There are 15 counties with between 1,000 and 5,000 private school students who attend 130 different private schools. This includes Geauga and Huron county that have relatively small numbers of public school kids, and 13 larger counties with between 15,000 and 45,000 public school students. The number of private schools per county ranges between 7 and 16.
4. **Public education is the only consistently available education choice in Ohio’s 46 small counties – those with less than 8,000 public school students**. There are 63 private schools scattered across these 46 counties. There are 11 counties without any private schools, 15 have one, and 14 have two. None of these counites has more than 3 private schools.
5. A total of about 7,000 students from these 46 counties combined attends a private school, about 4% of the private school students in Ohio. Of these counties, 11 have no private school students, and 30 have fewer than 300. Five have between 340 and 480 private school students.
6. Lawrence, Pickaway, Marian and Tuscarawas counties have more than 8,000 public school students but have fewer than 400 private school students and between 1 and 3 private schools.
7. There are 16 counties that have more than 10,000 public school students and between 410 and 1,000 private school students. There are 141 private schools in these counties.
8. Private education is a viable alternative in northeast and southwest Ohio’s more densely population counties, Franklin County and Lucas County, and a few outliers like Allen, Wood and Richland Counties. However, the northwest, central, and southeast are public school dependent.

**Sources of Private Education in Ohio’s 46 Counties with Smallest Student Population**

Private school use is minimal in the majority of Ohio’s counties. This is especially true in the 46 counties with smallest student population. A total of 61 private schools can be found in these counties. There are 11 counties that don’t have any private schools; 15 have 1 private school, 14 have 2, and 6 counties have three schools each.

**Table 7: Features of Private Schools by # of Private Schools in Each County for 46 Rural Counties**

**Provider 1 school/county 2 schools/county 3 schools/county Total**

Catholic 8 Elem., 16 Elementary 10 Elementary 34

1 K-12 1 High School 2

Christian 3 Elem. 1 Elementary 4

5 K-12 4 K-12 1K-12 10

Lutheran 3 Elementary 2 Elementary 5

7th Day Adventist 1 Elementary 1

Other 1 Elementary 2 Elementary 2 K-12 5

Total 15 schools 28 schools 18 schools 61 schools

**Table 8: Enrollment Size for Private Schools in Each County for 46 Rural Counties**

**1 school/county 2 schools/county 3 schools/county Total**

**# Students # schools # Schools # Schools**

10-100 4 15 10 29 Schools

101-200 9 10 6 25 Schools

201-450 2 3 2 7 Schools

Total 15 28 18 61 Schools

The 46 smallest counties have 8% of the private schools in Ohio. Rural nonpublic schools in these counties have these characteristics:

1. They are religious schools. The 5 schools that are not listed as a religious school includes 4 special education programs, and one Montessori school. There are 36 Catholic schools, 14 Christian, 5 Lutheran, and 1 7th Day Adventist.
2. They are mostly elementary schools. The Lutheran and 7th Day Adventist schools are K-6 or K-8 schools, as are 34 of the 36 Catholic schools and 5 Christian.
3. There is one free-standing high school with 150 students. High school students are enrolled in 1 Catholic and 10 Christian K-12 schools.
4. Rural private schools are small schools. The largest school has 436 students. Only 7 enroll more than 200 students, and 29 have fewer than 100.

**What Does the Distribution of Education Options Mean for Funding Education?**

Ohio is known for having an unconstitutional system for funding public education, and for having one of the most extensive sets of options for using public funds to pay for private education. Pending legislation and the state budget both include ways to once again ratchet up the possibilities for who can use public funds and where they can spend them for an education outside of traditional public school districts. The state budget also proposes continuation of the first sustainable funding formula that if fully funded would provide for a constitutional public education funding system.

As lawmakers and voters consider how to best use public resources, it is important to consider the impact on making public school funding constitutional, and how the nonpublic options will affect the communities in our very diverse state.

This analysis helps to connect these options to Ohio’s 88 counties. It is possible to see exactly where these options are significant, who benefits, and who pays. The impact is quite different, depending on where you live. **In every county, public education is the primary education opportunity. But in rural counties, the public system is the only universally available choice**. **Strengthening the public system is in the best interest of all of Ohio. More spending on private education is not.**

This analysis indicates:

1. The vast majority of students in all 88 Ohio counties attends a public school. Policies that take funds away from public schools are harmful to public schools everywhere in the state.
2. Private and charter schools are concentrated in urban counties, and about a dozen counties with more than 50,000 public school students. These options do not exist in most of Ohio’s rural or mid-sized counties – more than half the counties in Ohio. P**ublic funding for private education is not useful to students in most rural counties.** **Rural taxpayers underwrite private choice in the state – but not where they live.**
3. **The private schools that do exist in rural Ohio are narrowly focused**. They cater to specific religious groups, are mostly elementary schools, and have small enrollments that limit educational opportunities. These attributes further limit who benefits from private funding.
4. **If public funds for private school tuition encourage students to leave a public school, it is harmful to the students who remain in the school district they leave.** This transition rarely reduces costs, but always diminishes the resources and opportunities available to public schools. This is especially harsh in rural counties where small enrollment numbers make every public dollar important and every student essential to having the scale needed to offer a robust education
5. While urban youth have access to multiple education options because there is sufficient density to support them, diverting public funds from public schools to these alternatives, weakens the capacity of the public system to provide quality education to everyone, as required by the Constitution.
6. **The best way to secure quality education for all students, is to invest in the public system and remove any incentives to leave it.**

**Conclusion**

By mapping the location of public, private and charter school students it is possible to better see the diversity of our state and the realities of our residents – where they live. Policies impact places.

Legislators representing Ohio’s rural counties can best serve their constituents by investing the state’s education resources in making sure that every student has access to a high quality public education, regardless of the capacity of their community to fund it.

We have a public education system to ensure that all communities have the benefit of educated citizens. The founders of our state were right. Public education is the only universally available and accessible education opportunity in the state. That counts!

Democracy can’t afford to squander that reliable and accountable system.

**Sources**

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**\*Authors Note**

The April 6 version of this analysis used data for all categories of education that the Department of Education includes as “Public Education.” This includes charter schools, STEM, Joint Vocational Districts, and Public School Districts.

This version focuses exclusively on schools operated by Public School Districts. This is the option that is available in every community and is the primary education resource in the state. It resulted in Shelby and Mercer counties moving into the smallest population category: under 8,000 public school students.