

Ohio Gov. John Kasich faces ‘Robin Hood’ nickname as wealthy schools and legislators review his school-funding plan

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School treasurers with little reason to pay homage to Gov. John Kasich have given him a new nickname: “Robin Hood.”

The school-funding plan he proposed Monday would, for the next two years, shift state funds from wealthy suburban communities that are packed with conservative voters to cash-strapped communities, including left-leaning urban centers.

But while some treasurers laud Kasich's attempt to equalize funding between rich and poor communities, the usual critics are lamenting the fact that anyone has to lose money.

"I take that to mean the formula is woefully inadequate because one shouldn't have to rob Peter to pay Paul; there should be enough for Peter and Paul," said Stephen Dyer, a former state representative and education researcher for left-leaning Innovation Ohio, a think tank.

And still others, who stand to the right of the Republican governor on the conservative spectrum, criticize Kasich — a potential 2016 presidential candidate — for playing with liberal ideas.

"This school-funding plan is nothing more than wealth redistribution. And I definitely do not support it," said Ohio Rep. Kristina Roegner, R-Hudson.

Though Kasich's budget director, Timothy Keen, dismisses the idea that the school-funding proposal is "redistribution," Roegner thinks otherwise.

"At the end of the day, I do not agree with the governor's school-funding plan because it hurts four out of five of my school districts," Roegner said.

She vows to "work with colleagues in the House" to craft "a more equitable" school-funding formula. She'll be advocating on behalf of taxpayers in Woodridge, Hudson, Twinsburg and Nordonia Hills, who — according to a Beacon Journal analysis — would have to raise up to 3.4 mills in local property taxes to replace the \$6.5 million they would collectively lose in state funding by the final year of the governor's proposed two-year budget.

In response, Kasich's spokesman Rob Nichols said: "Anyone who believes that the state, with finite resources, should direct those resources away from poor districts and hand them over to wealthy districts should immediately and publicly articulate that argument."

Forcing new taxes?

"How are the school districts supposed to make up for that money? Does that mean that we have to pass additional school levies, which I know a lot of people in the area won't do, especially because Kasich is taking the money away?" said Scott Friedman, a Copley resident with two preschool-age children entering Herberich Elementary in the Copley-Fairlawn School District. Friedman, unlike state representatives answering to their wealthier constituents, is thinking beyond the boundaries of his legislative district.

He figures a 1.2 mill levy needed to replace a proposed 25 percent annual reduction in state funding might discourage economic growth in the business sector of Fairlawn, a prime revenue source for the education system that his son and daughter will attend. But he also acknowledges that he would vote for an even higher tax bill to sustain the educational trappings afforded students in Copley-Fairlawn schools and, with an eye on the larger picture, to help students in less well-off areas, like Akron, Barberton or Cuyahoga Falls.

“Am I opposed to [Kasich] taking some money and putting it toward other districts that aren’t as well off? Not necessarily, because I feel that every student deserves a quality education,” Friedman said.

Shifting funds

Kasich’s budget, which landed in a House finance committee on Tuesday, recommends five basic modifications to the current school-funding formula.

The plan promises to fully fund transportation. It gives income, instead of just property value, more influence over how much state support each community needs.

It phases out “guarantee” funds — additional school aid that holds schools harmless if a change in the formula reduces their funding. It also phases out state support for districts that, for the past decade, have watched the phase-out of their ability to tax business equipment and utility company assets.

And, without providing a dollar figure, it boosts state aid for privately run charter and private schools.

Combined with a slew of recommendations — many already proposed by the House — to heighten accountability for mostly low-performing charter schools, Kasich’s budget would give charter schools between \$300 and \$500 more per student by the end of the biennium. The larger share would go to brick-and-mortar charter schools; the smaller to online operators, which require fewer facilities.

Private schools benefit

Kasich also would beef up the EdChoice Scholarship — one of five publicly funded private school voucher programs — for high school students by 14 percent from \$5,000 to \$5,700. The higher amount per pupil is more state aid than 86 percent of Ohio’s 612 school districts got last year.

Together, the Beacon Journal estimates that the total funding increase for school choice would consume \$58.6 million of the additional \$458.9 million promised to public school districts over the biennium.

Charter schools, which enroll about 6.6 percent of Ohio students who receive per-pupil state aid, would receive 11.5 percent of the total bump in state aid.

Akron Public Schools, under the governor’s plan, would receive \$26.5 million more in state aid in 2017 than it can expect this year. That’s about a 15 percent increase in state aid, or an 8 percent increase in its \$315 million total budget.

Meanwhile, state aid leaving Akron Public Schools for charter and private schools would jump 3 percent from roughly \$34 million in 2015 to \$35.1 million in 2017.

These per-pupil increases in school-choice funding do not include the governor's proposal to set aside \$25 million to finance real estate for high-performing charter schools or a \$33 million addition, over the biennium, on top of the \$200 million that already flows directly to private schools to pay for anything from administrative salaries to technology upgrades.

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