

## **Criticism abounds in Ohio charter school funding**

### **Provisions are packed into the budget bill, drawing fire from opponents and even some charter backers**

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**By Jessica Brown**

Ohio's charter schools are, in many ways, big winners in Ohio's proposed biennial budget: The state's charter schools will receive more money per-student than most traditional schools – in many cases, thousands of dollars more.

The proposed budget, which Gov. John Kasich must sign by Monday, grants charter schools an estimated \$25.5 million more money than they get now to educate their students, a 3 percent increase – and an estimated \$7,392 per charter school student in state aid next year.

The budget proposal also gives charter schools an estimated \$7.3 million extra to buy or maintain their buildings.

Dozens of charter school provisions are packed into the budget bill, drawing a storm of criticism from charter opponents and, in some cases, even the schools' supporters, who say they don't go far enough.

Charter schools are publicly funded schools operated by independent organizations.

Ohio had 369 last school year, including three dozen in Greater Cincinnati.

According to May attendance data, charters enrolled about 116,000 students last year, or about 7 percent of the state's 1.6 million students.

The idea of charter schools, which emerged 15 years ago in Ohio, was to give independent organizations a crack at educating kids who hadn't succeeded in public schools.

But they are often lightning rods for controversy.

While some charter schools are rated academically excellent, many do no better than the traditional public schools from which their students came.

Some do much worse. And the more public money charter schools get, the louder the criticism.

**Funding doesn't work the same way**

The latest round of debate came this week when legislators in conference committee approved amendments to the budget proposal to change the way schools are funded over the next two years.

Next year, for example, charter schools could get an estimated \$7,392 per student in state aid while traditional public school districts will get only \$3,895 per student on average, according to draft funding The Enquirer obtained from the Senate this week.

The school-by-school data are expected to change some as enrollment numbers fluctuate.

The disparity raised the ire of Innovation Ohio, a Columbus-based think tank that often criticizes charter schools.

It issued a scathing report this week that, among other things, accuses the state of rewarding bad charter schools because of political cronyism.

The report says some of the worst schools getting the most money are run by Republican contributors.

“It’s a classic pay-to-play thing,” spokesman Dale Butland said.

Charter schools, however, have historically gotten more in state aid than traditional schools because of the way Ohio’s funding system works.

Traditional schools get their money from three places: the state, the federal government and local taxpayers. Charter schools get state and federal money, but unlike traditional schools, don’t have authority to seek levies for a local share.

That’s why the state gives charter schools more money to educate their kids than it gives traditional schools – because traditional schools are expected to levy the rest from taxpayers.

The state tries to divvy up the dollars to those districts based on the taxpayers’ ability to make up the difference, generally aiming to give poor districts more money.

State aid ranges from \$534 per-student next year for the wealthy Indian Hill school district to nearly \$9,000 per-student for the the rural Trimble Local School district in Athens County.

The state sets the amount it should cost to educate a traditional school student at \$5,745 per student per year and provides additional money to educate certain groups of kids, such as those with with disabilities or who speak limited English.

“That’s always the way it’s been,” said Ohio Department of Education spokesman John Charlton.

“If I get \$4,800 in state (money) per pupil, I have to make up the rest out of my local funding.

“Lots of districts will complain about that.

“But if I’m giving out \$5,500 (to charter schools) out and getting \$5,700 from the state, I’m making money.”

## **Concerns about academics, as well as management**

Much of the criticism of charters targets academic performance and oversight concerns.

Locally, several charter schools have closed because of financial problems.

In a couple of cases, criminal charges were filed against school leaders for allegedly mismanaging funds.

Butland, of Innovation Ohio, says the proposed budget does nothing to toughen standards for charters.

It specifies a charter school must close if it is in Academic Emergency, the worst category, for two of the past three years and also fails to make a year's worth of academic progress on state math or reading tests, unchanged from today's closure standards.

Legislators also removed a proposal that would have financially rewarded high-performing charter schools.

The bill does, however, does toughen rules for charter school sponsors or authorizers – the non-profit entities responsible for oversight. It allows the state to yank their sponsorship ability if they can't fix their schools.

Terry Ryan, vice president for Ohio Programs & Policy for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a policy think tank that also sponsors charter schools, says accountability standards are already tougher in Ohio than some other states.

Many states, he says, don't have an automatic closure policy.

"I don't agree that it has watered down accountability for charter schools," he said.

"I'm reading the language here on the authority of the department to take action against authorizers. I think that's a positive."

Bill Sims, CEO of the Ohio Alliance for Public Charter Schools, said the budget pretty much kept the status quo.

"You have little bits of up, little bits of down, and we're right where we've always been," he said.

Charters, like traditional schools, generally will have more money than last year, but less than they need.

"If you factor in inflation, charter schools have still lost funding," Sims said. •

## **How charters would be boosted**

<b>Community school</b>	<b>County</b>	<b>2014 funding</b>	<b>Pct. change from 2013</b>	<b>Change in per pupil funding</b>
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Life Skills Center- Middletown	Butler	\$1,656,679	9.8%	\$697.77
Middletown Fitness & Prep Acad	Butler	\$1,890,705	4.7%	\$220.94
Richard Allen Academy III	Butler	\$1,255,448	8.0%	\$423.47
Summit Academy Second Middletown	Butler	\$850,682	6.7%	\$921.73
Summit Academy- Middletown	Butler	\$1,631,620	8.1%	\$1,054.79
Accel Achieve Acad N Cinci	Hamilton	\$767,899	4.3%	\$158.31
Accelerated Achievement Acad	Hamilton	\$1,159,024	3.3%	\$100.81
Alliance Academy of Cincinnati	Hamilton	\$2,104,015	-1.8%	-\$226.15
Cincinnati College Prep Acad	Hamilton	\$6,014,646	3.0%	\$97.71
Cincinnati College Prep East	Hamilton	\$2,400,277	1.1%	-\$25.49
Cincinnati Leadership Academy	Hamilton	\$1,773,890	4.7%	\$218.10
Cincinnati Speech & Reading	Hamilton	\$1,633,943	2.4%	\$65.60
College Hill Leadership Academ	Hamilton	\$624,403	9.2%	\$509.96
Dohn Community	Hamilton	\$1,499,909	9.3%	\$570.00
East End Comm Heritage School	Hamilton	\$613,417	7.2%	\$399.08
Hamilton Cnty Math &	Hamilton	\$3,103,010	2.2%	\$33.01

Science

Horizon Science Acad. Cincinnati	Hamilton	\$3,073,657	4.0%	\$165.26
Impact Academy	Hamilton	\$639,847	-8.5%	-\$706.36
King Academy Community Sch	Hamilton	\$762,307	3.6%	\$148.23
Life Skills Ctr Of Cincinnati	Hamilton	\$966,982	17.3%	\$1,240.41
Life Skills Ctr Of Hamilton Co	Hamilton	\$854,910	20.0%	\$1,498.97
Lighthouse Community Sch Inc	Hamilton	\$689,038	4.1%	\$376.69
Mount Auburn International Aca	Hamilton	\$3,258,303	-1.7%	-\$216.26
Mt. Healthy Prep & Fitness Acad.	Hamilton	\$1,905,710	7.1%	\$409.94
Orion Academy	Hamilton	\$4,413,532	2.1%	\$44.57
P.A.C.E. High School	Hamilton	\$945,433	14.5%	\$880.70
Phoenix Community Learning Ctr	Hamilton	\$2,433,780	1.2%	-\$16.59
Riverside Academy	Hamilton	\$2,262,593	4.9%	\$260.97
Summit Academy Cincinnati	Hamilton	\$1,926,923	7.6%	\$933.57
Summit Academy Transition High	Hamilton	\$1,127,908	10.7%	\$1,270.30
T.C.P. World Academy	Hamilton	\$3,131,484	2.4%	\$61.95
Theodore Roosevelt	Hamilton	\$1,477,932	6.6%	\$356.11
V L T Academy	Hamilton	\$5,448,939	2.9%	\$96.36

Greater Ohio Virtual School	Warren	\$2,774,577	5.9%	\$380.09
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<b>Regional total</b>		<b>\$67,073,421</b>	<b>4.1%</b>	<b>\$198.77</b>
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### **Other changes for charter schools**

The proposed budget contained several policy changes for charter schools. Among them:

#### **Funding**

Gives an estimated \$25.5 million more state money to charter schools to educate their students, a 3 percent increase. Also gives an estimated \$7.3 million to buy or maintain their buildings, something they've not gotten before.

#### **E-schools**

Allows e-schools to collect tuition from out-of-state residents. Starting in 2014-15, e-school enrollment growth is capped at 15 percent for schools with 3,000-plus students and 25 percent for the rest. Limits enrollment in new e-schools to 1,000 students. Removes earlier provisions that would allow e-schools to divide into separate schools.

#### **Accountability**

Starting July 1, a elementary charter school must close if both of the following are true for at least two of the past three school years: 1) it's in academic emergency 2) it showed less than a year of growth in reading or math. That's the same as current law. An earlier provision would have required closure if just one of those were true. The budget also toughens sponsors' roles in closing poor-performing schools. A proposal that would have ensured high-performing charter schools wouldn't get funding cuts was removed.

#### **Transportation**

Starting in 2014-15, allows a charter school to take responsibility for transportation. State transportation dollars will be transferred to the school if it opts to do that.

#### **Physical Education**

Exempts charter schools from requiring teachers to have a physical education license to teach that class. E-schools must still offer physical education (an earlier provision would have dropped that requirement).

#### **Original Article:**

<http://news.cincinnati.com/article/20130629/NEWS/306290054/Criticism-abounds-Ohio-charter-school-funding>