



PLUCK & TENACITY

*How five private schools in Ohio
have adapted to vouchers*

BY ELLEN BELCHER

*Foreword and Executive Summary
by Aaron Churchill and Chad Aldis*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Chad Aldis, Vice President for Ohio Policy and Advocacy

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State-funded voucher programs have stoked political controversy, culture clashes, and pitched court battles. Sometimes referred to as “scholarships,” these vouchers enable students of limited means (or without access to a good public school) to attend a private school. The Buckeye State has weathered such storms under its exemplary leadership, which spans from former governor George Voinovich to present governor John Kasich—and includes many others. Today, Ohio is a national leader with respect to private-school choice.

We at Fordham have enthusiastically supported Ohio’s adoption and expansion of voucher programs and the life-changing potential that they hold for disadvantaged children. The state’s first voucher program, enacted in 1995, was the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring program. This voucher presently allows some 7,000 students, who would have otherwise attended a Cleveland public school, to attend a private school. In 2006, Ohio expanded vouchers statewide to students slated to attend a low-rated public school, and today, some 18,000 students use this voucher, known as EdChoice. The state has also given special-needs students the opportunity to attend private schools via vouchers, and within the past year, the state enacted new legislation that made vouchers available to more low-income children.

As voucher programs have grown in Ohio and nationally, much attention has been paid to the students, their performance, and the impact of private-school competition on the public schools they fled. All of this is perfectly understandable, appropriate, and necessary. And what have these studies shown? According to Greg Forster, “The empirical evidence consistently shows that choice improves academic outcomes for participants.” Meanwhile, Forster adds, “no empirical study has found a negative impact” on academic outcomes.¹

Yet given the political maelstroms of vouchers—not to mention the research scrutiny—it comes as a surprise that few analysts or advocates have asked about the private schools that accept scholarship students. As they accept voucher students, what if anything has changed in these schools? Has their character or culture shifted? Has instruction evolved? What are their challenges, and how do these schools overcome them?

To dig into these questions, we enlisted veteran journalist and former *Dayton Daily News* editorial-page editor Ellen Belcher. She has done fine work for Fordham in recent years, penning reports on Common Core implementation, a charter school for gifted students, and the reform-minded school district of Reynoldsburg. Ellen has talked with scores of educators across the Buckeye State, and we were confident that she would write judicious and thorough profiles of private schools participating in at least one of Ohio’s many school-choice programs.

FOREWORD

Naturally, it was not feasible to profile all 300-plus private schools that do so. We therefore attempted to target a small group of schools that (1) enrolled a significant number of voucher students, (2) were geographically diverse, (3) had differing grade spans, and (4) had differing religious (or nonreligious) affiliations.

Achieving all these goals proved difficult. There are few schools—especially private ones—that want a journalist asking them tough questions. In fact, one school declined multiple overtures to participate. Nonetheless, Ellen gained access to five private schools, all located in different Ohio cities and all enrolling substantial numbers of voucher students. Two of them serve high-school pupils, while the other three are K–8 schools. Our sample, however, is less religiously diverse than we had initially intended: three are Catholic and two are evangelical. (We had hoped for and tried to obtain access to a nonsectarian and Jewish private school.)

In Spring and Fall 2013, Ellen visited Eden Grove Academy, Immaculate Conception, Saint Martin de Porres High School, St. Patrick of Heatherdowns, and Youngstown Christian School. She spent a day and a half at each school, interviewing school staff (former and present) and parents. She engaged in numerous follow-up phone calls and emails in order to check facts and clarify quotes.

What did she discover in these snapshots of school life? First, these are *not* fairytale private schools of the costly, elite variety. They all struggle to make ends meet, and their educators are forthright about the challenges of instructing students who arrive in their classrooms far behind academically, from disadvantaged families, and sometimes from various religious backgrounds. Sometimes they even concede defeat and must ask a child to leave for the betterment of the rest of the student body—or perhaps for his or her own good.

But it is also evident that these schools remain steadfast, undaunted by their financial and academic challenges. They are strikingly mission focused, often with a crusader’s zeal to educate every child that comes through their door, bearing a voucher or not. They are also anchored by deeply held convictions—be they around behavioral standards, educational models, or religious practices—even as the school changes in other ways. Finally, the educators take seriously the task of educating kids well. They don’t tolerate low expectations, inferior instruction, or bad behavior.



*Mike Pecchia, president
of Youngstown Christian*



*Chad Harville, principal
of Eden Grove*



*Karyn Hecker, principal
of Immaculate Conception*

“...these schools remain steadfast, undaunted by their financial and academic challenges. They are strikingly mission focused, often with a crusader’s zeal to educate every child that comes through their door, bearing a voucher or not.”

In the pages that follow, we find a cast of characters who are part entrepreneur, part missionary, part executive, and part pugilist. We find the effervescent president of Youngstown Christian Mike Pecchia and his wife Karen, who also provide a home for two voucher students. We meet people like Chad Harville of Eden Grove, who made financial sacrifices for the sake of the school and its kids. (Harville quit a well-paying government job to become an educator at the cash-strapped school.) There is the tenacious sixty-seven-year-old Karyn Hecker of Immaculate Conception, who fights to keep her school financially afloat. We find Deb O’Shea, St. Pat’s principal, who withstands criticism about her school’s decision to accept voucher students, arguing that it has changed the school for the better. We meet Saint Martin de Porres president Rich Clark, who agonizes when a student fails to graduate—even being reduced to tears the first time a student left his school.

We salute the honesty and frankness of the people Ellen interviewed—a legion of educators, parents, and even students. Taken together, their comments depict life in private schools that operate in challenging social contexts and often on shoestring budgets. To be sure, our group of five schools cannot represent all of the private schools that take voucher students. Yet we think that most will agree that this study describes five schools with character—schools with pluck, resolve, and tenacity. These schools have adapted in some ways, yes, but they all unswervingly answer the call to educate society’s most at-risk students.



*Deb O'Shea, principal
of St. Patrick*



*Rich Clark, president
of Saint Martin de Porres*

One key theory behind vouchers is that by opening private-school opportunities to disadvantaged children, student outcomes will improve. Research and program evaluations have supported the theory. Participation in a voucher program, for example, has boosted the college-going rates for African American students in New York City, and the children who participated in the voucher program in Washington, D.C., were more likely to graduate from high school.² In Dayton, Ohio, African American students who participated in the privately funded PACE scholarship program to attend a private school demonstrated higher reading achievement after two years.³

The switch from public- to private-school environments can be a catalyst that boosts kids' outcomes. But what do we know about the private schools that educate voucher students? What are their missions, purposes, characteristics, and traits? Have they adapted and evolved as they educate voucher students, who tend to be socioeconomically disadvantaged?

In pursuit of answers to these questions, we studied five private schools—all of which take a considerable number of voucher students and are located in (or near) urban areas:

- Eden Grove Academy, Cincinnati (Grades K–8)
- Immaculate Conception, Dayton (Grades K–8)
- Saint Martin de Porres High School, Cleveland (Grades 9–12)
- St. Patrick of Heatherdowns, Toledo (Grades K–8)
- Youngstown Christian School, Youngstown (Grades K–12)

FINDINGS

The five profiles that follow in this study yield seven takeaways about the participating private schools:

1. **They are relentlessly mission oriented, and vouchers help support their missions.** Vouchers are advancing their schools' work by allowing them to enroll more disadvantaged students. Youngstown Christian's president states directly, "The church feeds the poor, clothes the poor, houses the poor. I say, 'Let's start educating them.'" The principals of St. Pat's and Immaculate Conception consider serving scholarship students to be part of the church's ministry. Said Karyn Hecker, Immaculate Conception's principal, "You can't conduct a ministry without money." Eden Grove's principal said that his educators are "called to be here," working with few breaks and for far less money than other schools pay. Saint Martin's work-placement program opens career possibilities for ambitious but disadvantaged youth. Students at Saint Martin have the opportunity to work at a variety of businesses or organizations, enhancing their résumés and heightening their professional aspirations.
2. **As a corollary, these private schools have kept their distinctive values.** Even as these schools have welcomed students who don't share their religious views, they haven't compromised or diluted the precepts that animate them. One administrator at St. Pat's remarked, "We don't have a public-school mentality. Your shirt is tucked in. It's, 'Yes, ma'am' and 'No, sir.'" Youngstown Christian allows corporal punishment (although it requires parental consent). The students at Immaculate Conception and St. Pat's take a daily religion class and attend Mass once a week, while Eden Grove focuses on Biblical values and it has weekly chapel services.

3. **The schools have become more diverse.** Eden Grove, St. Pat's, and Youngstown Christian once served mainly white students. Over time—through a combination of factors, including but not limited to vouchers—these schools have become racially diverse. Today, Eden Grove is 90 percent African American, while St. Pat's is one-third minority. Youngstown Christian now enrolls 60 percent minority students—and one of its leaders describes the school as practicing “intentional integration.” Immaculate Conception enrolls more students eligible for the free-and-reduced-price-lunch program than before: today, 75 percent qualify, while just seven years ago, roughly one-third of their students did so.
4. **Even as they welcome students who are far behind academically, these schools set high standards.** Youngstown Christian's school leader said that academic standards had to be raised in the early years of taking voucher students—the urgency of catching up low-achieving students demanded it. Immaculate Conception's principal told her teachers not to “dumb down” their curriculum to accommodate its voucher kids. The teachers at Eden Grove agonize about how to help students catch up—sometimes lamenting the quality of their curriculum—knowing that their school will not ask a child to leave due to academic difficulties. Up front, Saint Martin notifies applicants, who may be one or two years behind academically, that they must be committed to catching up and that this will take much hard work.
5. **Still, the schools worry about their academic quality.** Staff spoke candidly about their concerns over their academic quality and test scores. One principal said her school's standardized-test scores had “slipped” in recent years, while another observed that his school's test scores are “all over the place.” Eden Grove's former principal worries about his school's curriculum, saying that it had a lot of “fluff and redundancy.” The schools we visited also raised concerns about student misbehavior affecting the learning environment. However, this isn't a problem confined to voucher students—the leaders at St. Pat's made that clear to us. Saint Martin asks students who have not the will to work not to stay. Rich Clark, the school president, puts it bluntly: “If you lose your culture, you lose your school.”
6. **Financial realities factor into the schools' decisions to take voucher students.** Without vouchers, the leaders at Eden Grove and Immaculate Conception acknowledged that their school would not be open. The administrators at St. Pat's, too, remarked that vouchers have stabilized its finances—and further, that they have helped the school pay for services (e.g., band, a school psychologist) that would otherwise have been unaffordable. Youngstown Christian, with a school-building loan on its books, jumped at the opportunity to attract students from a wider pool through the voucher program. In contrast, Saint Martin remains the least reliant on vouchers of the five schools profiled: just one-third of its budget comes from the voucher programs.
7. **None of the schools objected to state testing requirements.** All the administrators are okay with Ohio's requirement that they administer assessments to voucher students. Such testing “made sense to me,” said the former principal of Eden Grove. Youngstown Christian's academic dean went as far as to say that he wishes private schools with large numbers of voucher students were given state report cards. But some schools also use other assessment instruments, including the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (Immaculate Conception) and the Scantron Performance Series (St. Pat's). Saint Martin's students—voucher or not—take the state assessments. State law says that high-school students, whether in a public or chartered nonpublic school, must pass the Ohio Graduation Tests to receive a high-school diploma.

CONCLUSION

Ohio's private-school-choice initiatives have produced a multitude of effects. For the kids who receive vouchers, the programs may generate big benefits—higher achievement, high-school graduation, or college enrollment—that may not have occurred in the environments of their previous public schools. But the voucher programs have also altered the everyday reality of private schools that participate.

Yet these schools have stayed true to their missions and values. The private schools we visited know what they are, and they're comfortable in their own shoes. The changes brought on by the introduction of voucher students have not eroded the distinctiveness that made them worth attending in the first place.

As their demographics have changed, however, private schools have faced challenges in educating students with greater educational needs than in the past. They've had to ratchet up their academic rigor to speed the progress of the children who come to their school one or more years below grade level. Some administer assessments—in addition to the state's assessments—to monitor the academic needs and growth of their pupils. Youngstown Christian acknowledged the need to upgrade the quality of its teachers when it began to admit scholarship students.

For policymakers, this report should prompt clearer thinking about how to strengthen a state's voucher programs. As we show, some private schools are teetering financially, which is one (but not the only) reason lawmakers should consider boosting the per-pupil voucher amount. This could help ensure that private schools can give at-risk students the resources needed to succeed.

At the same time, if states make substantial public investments in private-school options, taxpayers have every reason to expect strong student outcomes. The good news is that private schools seem to understand the need for academic accountability and transparency when participating in voucher programs—and states should beef up such measures, perhaps on a “sliding scale” determined by how many of their students use a voucher.

Most importantly, however, state policy must not trample on private schools' ability to chart their own course, adhere to their own mission, affirm their own values, and operate as they think best. Elsewise, we jeopardize the very qualities that make private schools worth choosing—and worth the investment.

NOTES

1. Greg Forster, *A Win-Win Solution: The Empirical Evidence on School Choice*, Third Edition (Indianapolis, IN: Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, April 2013).
2. Matthew M. Chingos and Paul E. Peterson, *The Effects of School Vouchers on College Enrollment* (Washington, D.C.: Brown Center on Education Policy at Brookings, 2012) and Patrick Wolf, et al., *Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Final Report* (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Education Sciences, 2010).
3. Martin R. West, Paul E. Peterson, and David E. Campbell, *School Choice in Dayton, Ohio after Two Years: An Evaluation of the Parents Advancing Choice in Education Scholarship Program* (Cambridge, MA: Program on Education Policy and Governance, 2001).

SCHOOL PROFILES

By Ellen Belcher



YOUNGSTOWN CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

Youngstown, Ohio



*“The church feeds the poor,
clothes the poor, houses the poor. I say,
‘Let’s start educating them.’”*

*Mike Pecchia, president
of Youngstown Christian*

Mike Pecchia, president of Youngstown Christian School, confesses that he hasn't always been a big supporter of school choice.

In 1998, his pastor at Highway Tabernacle Church—which owns Youngstown Christian—led a group that raised \$1 million to start a free public charter school. Eagle Heights Academy quickly attracted almost 1,000 students, some of whom might otherwise have attended Youngstown Christian.

“I was mad,” acknowledged the gregarious and kinetic Pecchia. Though he wasn't employed at Youngstown Christian then, he was a board member and his children attended the school, which was barely meeting payroll.

Eagle Heights, which ultimately was engulfed in scandal, has since closed, while Youngstown Christian has expanded and built a \$3.5 million high school. The K–12 school would be much different today but for Ohio's adoption of EdChoice vouchers—state money given to students, beginning in 2006, so they could escape failing public schools and instead attend private schools.

Despite the competition that Eagle Heights posed to Youngstown Christian for more than a decade, Pecchia said his pastor's motivations were hard to argue with: Poor families deserved a choice other than Youngstown's poor public schools.

Once a thriving industrial town, gritty Youngstown has been in economic free fall since its last steel mill closed in the 1970s. While unemployment was hollowing out the city, brazenly corrupt leaders, some of whom were taking orders from the mob, made Youngstown a synonym for scandal.

During the 1990s, the federal government ran a ten-year investigation into political corruption in Mahoning County that resulted in jail for a member of Congress, a prosecutor, a sheriff, judges, and a host of others.

Civic dysfunction and decades of middle-class flight amongst both whites and blacks proved devastating for Youngstown's schools. In 1990, the district enrolled more than 15,000 students. Today, enrollment is around 5,200, though the city contains an estimated 10,000 school-aged children. Community leaders have put much of their hope not in the school board but in Connie Hathorn, who became superintendent in 2011, shortly after the district became the first in Ohio to come under the thumb of the state because of its continuously dismal test scores.

Established in 1975, Youngstown Christian has endured the community's multiple convulsions and has served as the other religious-school option in a largely Catholic city. When vouchers became available in 2006, the school's seven-member board—all male, all deacons of the Assemblies of God Christian Highway Tabernacle Church—jumped at the opportunity to attract more Youngstown kids and simultaneously prop up the school's budget, which was dragged down by \$1.2 million in debt, much of it borrowed for the new high school.

Now, eight years later, more than half of the school's 500-plus students receive EdChoice Scholarships. In 2012–13, Youngstown Christian had the third-largest number of voucher students—284—among the almost 300 private schools in the state that accept them.

About another 12 percent of the school's students receive the Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship, a different kind of state voucher worth up to \$20,000 per disabled pupil.

“The word is out that they do a pretty good job,” said Ron Iarussi, superintendent of the Mahoning County Educational Service Center.

Fifty-three-year-old Pecchia, a CPA who was hired by the school in the middle of the first year that the school began accepting state money, has presided over a transformation that has financially stabilized the school but also dramatically changed its mission.

Once largely white and middle to low income, the school is now more than 60 percent minority. Of its 500-plus students, more than 400 were slated to attend a failing Youngstown public school, making them eligible for the EdChoice program. Under Ohio law, eligibility for the EdChoice voucher is determined by the state's rating of the public-school building a student would have otherwise attended.

In June 2013, Ohio expanded its voucher offerings to an additional 2,000 Kindergartners by creating a new statewide program based upon family income rather than assignment to a failing school. Still, Pecchia worries that what the government gives, it can one day take away.

Meanwhile, increasingly financially strapped suburban schools are knocking at the doors of the same children that Youngstown Christian would like to attract. By Pecchia's count, nine nearby districts have adopted "open-enrollment" policies and now welcome pupils from beyond their own boundaries.

"It's becoming more of a marketplace," said Pecchia, who two years ago raised tuition rates to \$4,250 to match the value of the state's vouchers for elementary students and to \$5,000 for high-school students. The school's sticker prices are misleading, though: after multi-child discounts and financial assistance for struggling families, Youngstown Christian's average tuition payment is \$3,750.

"We've got to become a school that attracts more people who can pay," Pecchia said. "That means the suburbs." And to ensure that poor families can afford the school, "We have to find a way to raise money for scholarships."

"The church feeds the poor, clothes the poor, houses the poor," Pecchia said. "I say, 'Let's start educating them.'"



Private schools, even those with large concentrations of voucher students, are not given state report cards and grades. Joshua Reichard, Youngstown Christian's academic dean, wishes that they were.

Youngstown Christian High School met all the state's benchmarks in five subjects.

"Our ultimate goal here is lifting kids out of poverty," Reichard said. "Education is the tool that changes a generation."

This three-year veteran at Youngstown Christian went on to observe, "Vouchers level the playing field for low-income families wanting a choice." He's embarrassed that the Christian school movement historically was driven in part by whites who wanted to avoid sending their children to school with blacks.

"I call what we're doing intentional integration," said Reichard, who received his doctorate from South Africa's University of the Western Cape. "We are not going to be like some other private religious schools."

Youngstown Christian students come from more than one hundred churches, both Protestant and Catholic. To be admitted, a student's pastor or priest must sign a referral and attest that the child attends worship services. Pecchia interviews every family and prospective students who are older than fifth grade. He also reviews the essays that prospective upperclassmen write about someone whom they admire.

Reichard said the school rejects some applicants for behavioral reasons, though rarely for academic difficulties. About two or three times each year, a student is asked to leave.

"We have one simple rule," Reichard said. "Teachers have the right to teach, and students have the right to learn."

*"Our ultimate goal here is lifting kids out of poverty," Reichard said.
"Education is the tool that changes a generation."*

Pecchia said that when students get out of line, he tries to "explain the difference between mercy and grace, but there are still consequences for their actions."

"Do they own their mistakes? Are they remorseful? And I've got to have parental support," he said. "If I'm missing two of the three, I have a hard time going forward."

"I've taken kids in who were terrible in a public school, and they're different kids here," Pecchia said. "But it doesn't always work out."

Linda Mansfield was principal at Eagle Heights when the charter school was closed by the state and now serves as Youngstown Christian's dean of students. A Catholic, she said that Youngstown Christian is successful because "the leadership is involved."

"The constant is the feeling that God is in the building," said Mansfield, who also has taught in Youngstown City Schools.

Though she has only taken out "Old Thunder" once in her two years at the school, parents must sign a form that allows the school to use corporal punishment—one of multiple practices that were new to Mansfield.

"If they say 'damn,' I call their parents," she said. When she is investigating misbehavior, "The kids will spill their guts. In a public school, they would never tell on each other."

Teachers credit Pecchia, who has two students who attend the school living in his home, and Reichard with raising classroom expectations, especially at the high school.

*Monica Perkins,
middle-school assistant and
basketball coach of Youngstown Christian*





*Nancy Jacobsen, Kindergarten teacher
of Youngstown Christian*

“You’ve got to do your job or you will get fired,” said Joyce Hillman, who teaches Algebra II, advanced math, and calculus. “That’s a hard thing for a Christian to do,” she said. “But we’re here to educate children, not give you a job because you’re a Christian.”

Pecchia’s wife Karen, who is the attendance officer and director of student services, agreed that the school’s instruction wasn’t always rigorous.

“Our curriculum was laid-back,” she said. “Our clientele got different (under vouchers), so we had to be different.”

The transition has not always been easy.

Mike Pecchia said, “We basically told our staff, ‘If you’re not willing to change with us, you’ve got to go.’” He fired half a dozen staff members in the early days after voucher students were accepted.

Nancy Jacobsen, who teaches Kindergarten, drives an hour each way to the school from North Canton because, as she said, “My heart is here.”

She said that she and her husband, a pastor, sent their children to the school because of the diversity—“the cultural, academic, and socioeconomic mix”—of students. The low pay—no teacher earns more than \$36,000—is a sacrifice, but she’s willing because “I’m going to have to stand before the throne of God.”

On a day in May 2013, her fifteen students were learning why spiders are not insects, and they eagerly competed to identify sight words on a SMART Board. “We expect a lot,” Jacobsen said.

That same day, Mick Naples, who teaches Bible class to upper-grade pupils, was leading a discussion about service to God.

Talking about dating, Naples, told the male students that they should “guard” the “purity” of their dates. “You will be held accountable for what you do, what you do with His daughter,” Naples said.

In Nicole Blaze’s law class, students were reviewing the differences between burglary, robbery, and theft.

One student joked, “I’m still not happy. We didn’t do a mock trial. I want to come to school in a suit and with a briefcase.”

Monica Perkins is one of the school's few African American staffers. A basketball coach for the girls' team and a middle-school inclusion assistant, she said that teachers are "color blind" in their relationships with students.

Brenda Williams's grandson, Kerrington Tucker, graduated from Youngstown Christian last year, though he split his time between Youngstown Christian and Choffin Career and Technical Center, which is operated by Youngstown City Schools. A voucher student, he had attended Youngstown's Chaney High School as a freshman, but Tucker said it was a "horrible experience."

"Everything he took to school, they robbed him blind," said his grandmother.

Youngstown leaders know there is a widespread perception that the city's public schools are unsafe and are plagued by constant change and turmoil—public sentiment that was documented in a 2012 study by the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation. The study also said that citizens are supportive and proud of a select few programs (Chaney's science, technology, engineering, and math program and the district's early-college academy, which met all the state's indicators in 2012–13, are two such examples).

"The Lord has us here for a reason," Karen Pecchia said. "He brought us the kids on vouchers, and he'll deliver us other kids."

Pecchia said he wants to see the city's public schools succeed, if only because he doesn't have the capacity to educate 5,000 students. But he also believes Youngstown is consciously trying to limit students' eligibility for vouchers.

The district has mostly eliminated its middle schools by moving sixth graders to elementary schools and seventh- and eighth-graders to the high schools. While Pecchia concedes that Youngstown has had to close schools because of slumping enrollment, the new assignments mean large numbers of students who would have been eligible for vouchers next year won't be for at least two years.

Voucher eligibility hinges on attending a school that received a "D" or "F" grade for two out of three years. When students are assigned to a school that didn't exist before, the clock resets.

"They move kids around constantly," Pecchia said. "One of the motivations is to reduce the number of kids who are eligible for EdChoice."

District superintendent Hathorn did not return calls requesting comment.

Youngstown Christian leaders are considering all of their options to make sure that the school—and its mission—continues, with or without vouchers. Pecchia even thinks about the possibility of becoming a charter school, though that would eliminate religiously based instruction during the school day.

"The Lord has us here for a reason," Karen Pecchia said. "He brought us the kids on vouchers, and he'll deliver us other kids."



IMMACULATE CONCEPTION SCHOOL

Dayton, Ohio



*“We get the parents who,
for the most part, make a conscious choice.*

*They want what’s better
for their child.”*

*Karyn Hecker, principal
of Immaculate Conception*

Karyn Hecker became principal of Dayton's Immaculate Conception School in 2006, the first year that Ohio offered vouchers to defray the cost of private-school tuition for families wanting to escape failing public schools.

The decision to accept voucher students was driven mainly by the close-knit parish's determination not to let its school, which mostly serves low-income children, go under. It came at a time when Catholic dioceses were aggressively merging and closing schools across the country, especially in inner cities, and Dayton's Catholic schools were among those experiencing an emotionally wrenching downsizing.

Hecker knew what an infusion of voucher students—and the public money they'd bring—would mean to a school on the financial brink. She had been principal at Dayton Catholic Elementary, an inner-city Catholic school that had recently closed. She came to Immaculate “pretty angry and very hurt” that she had been forced to shutter a school that she believed was a lifeline for poor, African American children. What worried her was that she might have to do it again.

Moreover, Immaculate's precariousness was personal to the dogged, straight-talking Hecker. She had attended the school as a child—when it served almost five times as many students—and she was married at the parish church.

In the seven years since Immaculate introduced vouchers, it has become increasingly dependent on the program for the revenues that enable it to educate its pupils. In 2012–13, almost three-quarters of the school's 207 students received EdChoice Scholarships. (In 2013–14, 171 students received these vouchers.)

Without the voucher, many of those students could not have afforded the school's \$4,300 tuition—or even the discounted fee of \$2,550 that parish members pay.

Today, the K–8 school has enough students to support one class for each grade. It's trying to create a pupil pipeline by leasing four classrooms to the local Head Start program. Last year's (2012–13) Kindergartners were the biggest voucher class in the school, with twenty-nine out of thirty youngsters receiving a grant. The eighth-grade class had fourteen students, six of whom received vouchers.



Not everyone at Immaculate supported taking vouchers or welcoming more poor, non-Catholic children, virtually all of whom were fleeing a troubled public school in Dayton.

But the sixty-seven-year-old Hecker, who has worked in Catholic education for thirteen years, had no patience for the objections.

“You can't conduct a ministry without money,” she said.

All agree that the admission of voucher students has changed the East Dayton neighborhood landmark. The school has far more poor students today than it did before it began to participate in the EdChoice Scholarship program. Seven years ago, about a third of the school's students were eligible for free and reduced-priced lunches. Now, 75 percent qualify.

Academics are a greater challenge, too, as many of these new pupils are well behind when they arrive at Immaculate. Mollie Mallin, an eight-year veteran who teaches math, science, and religion to fourth and fifth graders, said, “The first two or three years—as teachers—we noticed the biggest change.”

Hecker, however, demanded that “we not dumb down the curriculum,” Mallin said. Her principal insisted that the school still had gifted children, arguing that teachers just “may not recognize them.”

Mallin said she notices that many of her students’ parents aren’t able to help with homework. “We don’t assign as many projects that involve going to the library,” she said. “We supply the resources in the classroom.”

Gaile Beale, who volunteers at the school three days per week, retired in 2006 from Immaculate after teaching there for thirty-eight years. The school, she said, can’t count on the volunteers it once had. Fathers no longer run the fish-fry fundraisers, for example, and mothers are too swamped to help in the classroom.

Sandy Beall, an art and physical-education teacher whose three children attended the school, said vouchers are only part of the explanation for the changing face of Immaculate. Though some middle-class families did leave because of the influx of poorer students, she said the school’s demographics had been changing for years.

Residents started leaving the historically white, blue-collar Belmont neighborhood in the 1970s with Dayton’s adoption of busing for desegregation. The exodus has continued with the city’s hemorrhaging of manufacturing jobs and population.

Beall said some parishioners were concerned about accepting vouchers because many of the new

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Hecker bristles when she recalls that some families left because “we were going to take ‘those children,’” which she interpreted to mean poor, African American kids.

“Those are fighting words in our school,” she said.

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students were certain to be non-Catholic, and church members feared the school would lose its religious identity. She thinks that has turned out to be a non-issue because the school still does “everything we used to do.” Religion is taught daily, and children attend Mass or prayer service once a week.

Yet, Catholicism is taught more than it is preached. “It’s not our job to convert people,” Hecker said. “That’s God’s job. Our job is living it [the church’s teachings].”

Father Satish Joseph, associate pastor of Immaculate Conception, estimates that twenty-five to thirty families left the school the first year that vouchers were accepted, with enrollment falling to 190 students the second year. He said some critics didn't want the school "downgraded from its glorious past" but acknowledged that, from a financial perspective, the decision was a "no-brainer."

Because of vouchers, he said, the church—which serves about 800 families—has cut its subsidy to the school by more than half. Now the parish kicks in about \$75,000 annually for the school.

If the EdChoice program is ever eliminated, Joseph said, "I can see four schools—including ours—in our neighborhood closing...We've now become dependent."

Hecker bristles when she recalls that some families left because "we were going to take 'those children,'" which she interpreted to mean poor, African American kids.

"Those are fighting words in our school," she said.

Lori Wolff's son attended Immaculate from preschool through eighth grade and now attends Archbishop Carroll High School. She "knew a lot of the people who left" when the parish began accepting vouchers, but she stayed because she believed "we were supposed to be open to everybody."

A Kettering resident, Wolff was not eligible for a voucher. "It would have been nice to have it," she said, but she doesn't think it was unfair that she didn't get the benefit.



In addition to administering the Ohio Achievement Assessments (OAA) to all students—not just those receiving vouchers—Immaculate also administers the Iowa Test of Basic Skills.

Hecker is candid about the results, "Am I satisfied? Absolutely not." She is particularly worried about students' math scores.

Last year, 67 percent of the school's twenty-four third graders tested proficient or above on the reading portion of the OAA, while just 42 percent were proficient in math. In fourth grade, which had only seventeen students, 76 percent were proficient in reading; 29 percent were proficient in math.

Though present test results are far from what she wants, Hecker believes that parents are drawn to the school because of its culture. "Are you hearing any chaos going on?" she asked, pointing down the cavernous hallways where children moved quietly to dated but welcoming classrooms.

While some Catholic schools do not advertise that they accept vouchers, Immaculate unabashedly uses the program as a recruiting tool. When families inquire about the school, Hecker's assistant asks families to what public school their children would be assigned and then walks them through the voucher application if they're assigned to a failing one.

*Mollie Mallin, fourth- and fifth-grade teacher
of Immaculate Conception*





*Pam Styles, reading specialist
of Immaculate Conception*

(In 2012–13, there were twenty-six public schools in Montgomery County whose assigned students qualified for a voucher. All but two of these schools are in the Dayton Public Schools system. Under Ohio’s new expansion of vouchers, 2,000 low-income Kindergarten students statewide can apply for vouchers even if they would not be attending a poorly performing school.)

Because she’s aggressive about recruiting students, Hecker said Immaculate’s relationship with the local public system is strained. “It feels very much like they’re putting obstacles in our way,” she said.

A “for instance,” Hecker said, is that Immaculate families have to enroll their Kindergartners in Dayton Public Schools even if they know they’re going to attend Immaculate, and the family must then file paperwork to unenroll them. The effort is frustrating and time-consuming, she said.

A spokesperson for Dayton Public explained that because the district doesn’t necessarily assign children to a neighborhood school and families are allowed to choose where they send their children, parents have to register in order to obtain a school assignment that would allow them to qualify for a voucher. If they accept the voucher, they then have to unenroll.

Most parents don’t know about vouchers, Hecker said, until she or her assistant tells them. Many are stunned—and grateful.

Over a child’s thirteen-year school career, “Vouchers are a pretty valuable thing,” Hecker emphasized.

(At current Ohio voucher levels, a student receiving this assistance from Kindergarten through twelfth grade could qualify for as much as \$58,250 in financial help. High-school vouchers are worth \$5,000 annually.)

A retired Dayton Public Schools teacher, Pam Styles is a reading specialist at Immaculate. She is effusive about the school, calling it the “neatest place.” “Kids are valued. Teachers and administrators are valued,” she said.

Having worked in Dayton Public Schools, Styles said she understands some complaints about vouchers. “It’s tough,” she said. “If you take out the kids who have (parental) backing, that leaves public schools with a big hole.”

Hecker agrees.

“We get the parents who, for the most part, make a conscious choice,” she said. “They want what’s better for their child.”

Joseph, the associate pastor, said that he, too, is sensitive to public education's objections to vouchers, but he believes that poor families deserve the right to choose where their children attend school.

"If Dayton schools were in great shape, I would say it's less complicated than it is," he said, noting that the district spends more than \$14,000 per pupil, while Immaculate spends under \$5,000. Still, "There is a little part of my conscience that asks if we're doing the right thing."

Some families of voucher students have chosen to become Catholic and members of the parish. Joseph points out the irony that it is in Immaculate's financial interest that they not join the church. Ohio law requires that voucher students are charged what they would otherwise pay if they didn't qualify for the financial help.

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Over a child's thirteen-year school career, "Vouchers are a pretty valuable thing," Hecker emphasized.

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Because parish members receive a discount on their tuition, a voucher student whose family belongs to the church nets the school \$1,700 less in state funds than if they were nonmembers.

"We take the financial loss," the associate pastor said. "The choice is always in favor of the family being a part of the Catholic Church."

Immaculate does not have an admissions test for students, but Hecker acknowledges that especially disadvantaged or disabled students might not do well at the school. "We don't have many support services," she said.

This year, Immaculate also began accepting the Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship, a different kind of voucher that allows students on Individualized Education Plans to attend private schools and receive a voucher worth up to \$20,000, depending on the severity of a child's disability. Three students receive this assistance.

Students are not kicked out for failing grades at Immaculate, but two to three students per year are obliged to leave for bad behavior.

"When the school is no longer a safe place, I do what I have to do," Hecker said unapologetically.

That history has resulted in a few parents worrying about losing their voucher when their child has been disciplined.

Mallin, the fourth- and fifth-grade teacher, said she's occasionally heard of parents telling their children that they might have to leave if they don't perform well. "It puts a lot of pressure on them," she said disapprovingly. "Nobody wants to be bad. Nobody wants to fail."

With three-quarters of the school's revenue coming from vouchers, Hecker understands that her school owes its existence to taxpayers and lawmakers who can change their minds on a whim or in a financial crunch.

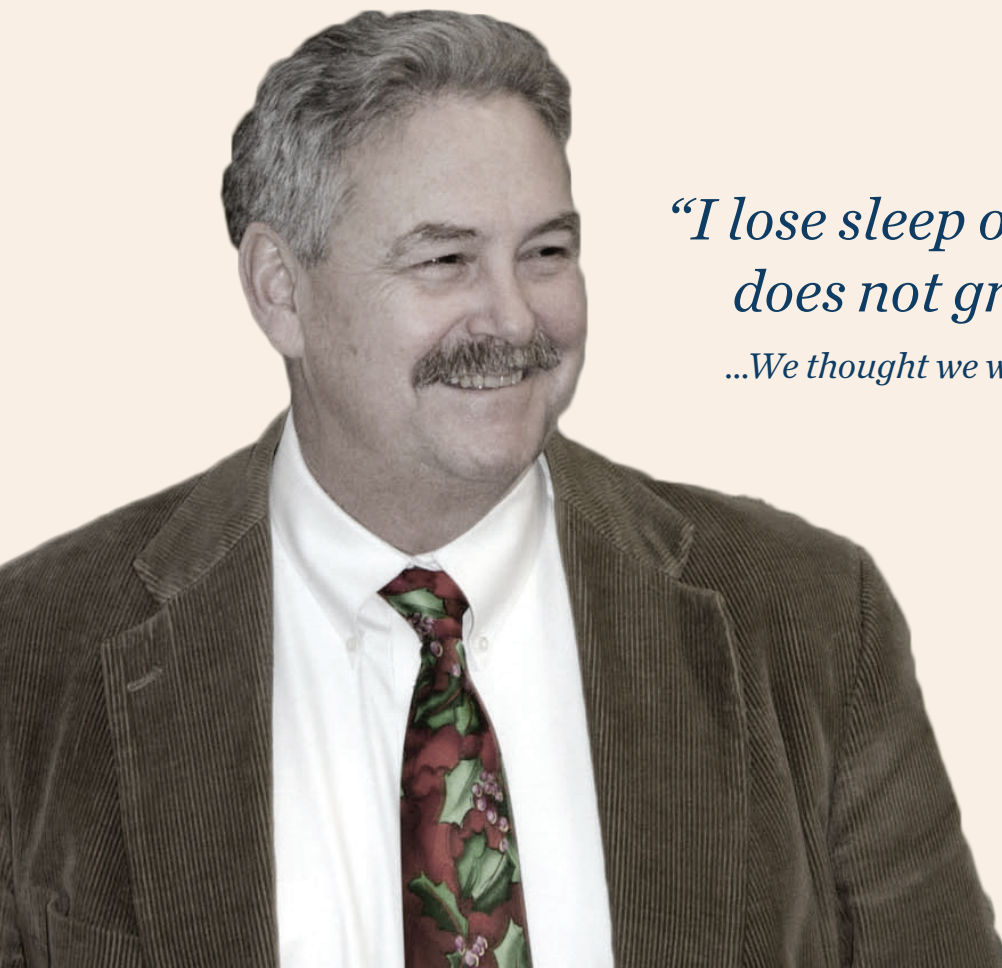
How would her families respond if vouchers were ever threatened?

"I think we could muster a protest," Hecker said wryly.



SAINT MARTIN DE PORRES HIGH SCHOOL

Cleveland, Ohio



*“I lose sleep over every kid who
does not graduate from here.
...We thought we were going to save everybody.”*

*Rich Clark, president
of Saint Martin de Porres*

The parking lot behind Saint Martin de Porres High School could pass for an airport taxi stand. By 8 a.m., dozens of cabs, vans, and shuttles are lined up to take students from the celebrated Catholic school to jobs where they earn most of their private-school tuition.

School president Rich Clark likes to say that Saint Martin, one of twenty-six schools in the national Cristo Rey Network, is an “exclusive club.”

“If you can afford the tuition,” he often quips, “then you can’t come.”

To attend Saint Martin, a family’s income must be at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level—give or take a bit. Most applicants are also a year or two behind academically and, if a student is not committed to catching up, he or she is asked to leave.

Most of Saint Martin’s 424 students are eligible for vouchers under one of two state-sponsored voucher programs: the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program and the statewide EdChoice Scholarship program.

Enacted in 1995, when George Voinovich was governor, the Cleveland program today offers eligible students up to \$4,250 for tuition to attend a private elementary school and up to \$5,700 for private high-school tuition.

First as mayor and then as governor, Voinovich was a vocal critic of the academic performance of Cleveland’s public schools. He contended that competition from vouchers would force education reform in his hometown.

The Cleveland-only program was vigorously challenged, with the U.S. Supreme Court deciding on a five-to-four vote in 2002 that it was constitutional. The *New York Times* called the *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* decision “the most important ruling on religion and the schools” in four decades.

Then in 2006, the statewide EdChoice program was created. It allows students living anywhere in Ohio to apply for a voucher to attend private school *if* they’ve been slated to a failing public school.

About one-third of Saint Martin’s \$6.6 million annual budget comes from the two voucher programs, putting the school in a unique category among schools in Ohio with a high percentage of voucher students: unlike other such schools, the state does not pay the bulk of Saint Martin’s bills.

The largest share of the almost \$15,000 that Saint Martin spends per student comes from what students earn working five days per month.

Cristo Rey, whose founders believe that they’ve developed a sustainable business model for private high schools, has also opened schools in Cincinnati and Columbus.

To employers, Saint Martin, which is on Cleveland’s East Side in a historically Slovenian neighborhood, sells itself as a temp agency. For \$28,100, a business “purchases” one full-time-equivalent student employee for the school year. Four students share that entry-level job, with one individual at the work site each day. (Students rotate working Mondays.)

Because Saint Martin has an extended day and school year, students don’t lose instruction time.

The infectiously enthusiastic Clark, who was Saint Martin’s founding president and formerly a principal at the renowned Saint Ignatius High School, tells potential employers that he can offer them something other temp agencies can’t: “We can call their mothers,” he said.

Administrators said that students are rarely fired from their jobs, though it does happen. Employers receive an orientation to the Saint Martin program and a handbook laying out the school’s expectations for students.

Because the school does not have not enough “paying” jobs for every student and to ensure that every student is employed, some are assigned at no charge to non-profits willing to work with a student. The Cleveland Clinic this year “bought” twelve jobs, making it Saint Martin’s single-largest employer of students.

Leslie Berdecia works with four Saint Martin students who are given administrative tasks at the Center for Spine Health at the Clinic.

“They all have different maturity levels,” Berdecia said, “but I think that they do pretty well. They ask questions when they need to...We are trusting them to do the jobs we ask them to do without hand-holding them every day.”

Keith Laschinger, the vice president of advancement, said that under the Cristo Rey work-study business model, vouchers may not become the school’s dominant source of funding. The goal is to grow the school to 524 students, at which point work-study revenue would account for 51 percent of the school’s budget.

“They all have different maturity levels,” Berdecia said, “but I think that they do pretty well. They ask questions when they need to...We are trusting them to do the jobs we ask them to do without hand-holding them every day.”

Salaries for starting teachers closely match those in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, although benefits are not as generous. The school has sixty-one full-time employees, plus part-timers and volunteers.

Now in its tenth year, Saint Martin measures its success in part by how many alums complete college. The goal is for 70 percent of graduates to earn a degree within seven years. Nine of the fifty seniors from the 2008 class have earned degrees, and Clark said more from that group are on track to do so.

The 2013 senior class grew to sixty-five, while there are ninety-eight seniors this year.

Besides voucher students from Cleveland, Saint Martin also enrolls pupils from four nearby school districts who are also eligible for vouchers under the statewide program.

Monica Lawson, Saint Martin’s admissions director, said that current and former students are her best recruiting tools. She visits eighth-grade classes and high-school nights at middle schools, inviting rising high schoolers to shadow Saint Martin upperclassmen. Once the younger students visit, Lawson said, they go home and push their parents to allow them to attend Saint Martin.

What typically excites them is the opportunity to have a job.

Lawson said parents are grateful for the voucher program, but too many don't accept their responsibilities under it. The school has to pester families, for instance, to sign their child's voucher checks that come to the school from the state (and are made out to the parent) three times each year.

"We shouldn't have to make twenty phone calls before you sign it," Lawson said.

When asked what the state could do to make the voucher programs better, Lawson said she's perplexed why fathers who have custody of a child have difficulty getting a voucher.

"If Mom signs, it's processed," Lawson said. "It's not equal for biological dads."

A spokesman for the Ohio Department of Education said that, by law, only a child's legal guardian may apply for a voucher. But guardians may not always have physical custody of a child or be in charge of decisions about schooling.

Moreover, in families where there's a shared-parenting agreement, the child must be assigned to live with the parent whose address would result in him or her being assigned to a so-called "failing" school.

Nor are all vouchers created equal. High-school students living in the city of Cleveland get \$5,700 (up from \$5,000 in 2012-13), while students living outside the city and enrolling under EdChoice receive \$5,000.

Voucher proponents in Cleveland and elsewhere insist that \$5,000 doesn't nearly cover the cost of educating a high-school student.

Meanwhile, parents have trouble keeping up with the nuances of Ohio's voucher programs.

This is the second year that students living in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District have been able to apply for a voucher to attend a private high school such as Saint Martin if they attended a Cleveland public school in eighth grade. Previously, vouchers under the Cleveland program were only available to private-school students who had chosen to leave the public schools and obtain a voucher by the eighth grade.

That change has resulted in an influx of students from Cleveland public schools who have never attended a private school and who are outrageously behind, some staff members said.

"We definitely saw differences in expectations," Lawson said, with the new Cleveland public students.

Lawson said she was "shocked" that some parents were irritated when Saint Martin teachers would contact them about a child's misbehavior or academic difficulties.

Laschinger has a different take, one shared by school president Clark. He doesn't agree that children coming out of Cleveland's Catholic schools are typically better prepared than those who've attended Cleveland public schools.

"I think some of the Catholic schools are just as bad as the public schools," Laschinger said. "They're woefully underfunded."

*Monica Lawson,
admissions director of Saint Martin de Porres*





*A'bria Robinson, high-school junior
of Saint Martin de Porres*

A'bria Robinson, a high-school junior, said the work experience she's getting by attending Saint Martin de Porres "makes my resume beautiful." She has worked for three businesses, including a call center that was an hour-long ride from Saint Martin her freshman year.

"I learned a lot of customer-service skills," she said. "I was selling a product." At first, she said, she worried about being treated "like a child." "That's when I had to prove myself."

Pressed about what she doesn't like about Saint Martin, A'bria, who is aware that she has received a Cleveland voucher since she was in Kindergarten, said she was upset that nineteen staff members left the school last year.

"It's been hard to build new relationships," she said. "But I love to network. I'm all about networking. Maybe it was a good thing in disguise."

In addition to an unusual burst of faculty turnover last spring, an unusually high number of students—about forty—were told they could not come back in the fall.

Teachers and administrators alike agree that the school struggled in 2012–13. They said too many second and third chances were being given to students who were not meeting expectations, and rules were being unevenly enforced or ignored.

"The culture wasn't what we wanted it to be," Laschinger said. In addition, enrollment was affected because not all parents and prospective students were coming away impressed and choosing to enroll. The Fall 2014 freshman class is 118 students, while the goal was 150.

"We needed to re-commit that this is a college-preparatory school," Laschinger said. "We needed to re-dedicate ourselves to taking care of our people....You walk through the building today, and it's like night and day" compared to last year, he said.

Students are aware that expectations are high and that they will not be allowed to coast.

Lawson, the admissions director, said the kids often preface their complaints about homework or grading policies by saying, "If this were a real school..."

J. Michael Gerstenberger, who teaches American history, has heard that line. One disgruntled sophomore argued as Gerstenberger was handing back a quiz in September: "If this was a normal school, this would be a C."

"Gigi" Gonzalez, most of whose friends attend Cleveland public schools, said her mother "makes it a priority" that she and her sister, who is a freshman at Saint Martin, renew their Cleveland voucher requests each year.

“She makes a point to tell me to be grateful for what I have. If I weren’t here, I wouldn’t be as good as I am,” she said.

Sixteen-year-old Jack Klucznik said he came to Saint Martin because it was “affordable” and “no one judges you here.”

He’s working for a second year at WadeTrim, a civil-engineering firm, where he does office work. “They let me do whatever they think I’m capable of,” said Jack, who calls Ohio State University his “dream college.”

One of Saint Martin’s few Caucasian students, Jack doesn’t feel like other students are particularly mindful of his race. “It’s like I’m not even white,” he said.

Ambernieke Greene rides fifty minutes, which includes dropping off other students at work sites, to her job at St. John Medical Center, where she puts treatment orders into a database, transports patients, and answers phones. Now in her second year there, the junior hopes to attend Case Western Reserve and become a forensic scientist.

She likes Saint Martin, she said, because “teachers want to help you.” A student who “wants to socialize all the time” and who “doesn’t like homework” wouldn’t enjoy the school.

Elizabeth Sims, 62, is Ambernieke’s great aunt and adoptive mother. Sims, who lives in Cleveland near two public schools, said that she worried from the time that Ambernieke was three years old: “Where would I put her?” She was unhappy with the education that her two now-adult sons received in Cleveland, and for a time, she considered homeschooling Ambernieke.

“I encourage other people to apply,” Sims said. “The voucher program has saved us.” Though she would like to buy a smaller home, Sims, who is retired, said she would not move out of Cleveland to a district where Ambernieke would not be eligible for a voucher.

“I encourage other people to apply,” Sims said. “The voucher program has saved us.”

Clark admits that Saint Martin is performing a form of social “triage,” working only with children and families who are willing to abide by its rules and who can imagine a future that includes succeeding in school and going to college.

“I lose sleep over every kid who does not graduate from here,” the president said. “The first time we had a kid leave, Mary Ann [Vogel, the founding principal] and I closed the door to her office and we cried like babies. We thought we were going to save everybody.”


But Clark is unapologetic about telling students who aren’t willing to do their work—whether at school or on the job—that they can’t stay.

“They have to go somewhere else,” he said. “If you lose your culture, you lose your school. This school is for kids who want to be here.”



ST. PATRICK OF HEATHERDOWNS

Toledo, Ohio



*“Some people who belong
to our parish think our culture is changing.
I don’t believe it’s true.”*

Deb O’Shea, principal of St. Pat’s

The third year that St. Patrick of Heatherdowns accepted state-funded voucher payments from students assigned to “failing” public schools, a small group of parents considered circulating a petition opposing the decision.

The mistake the critics made is that they assumed they knew which families were getting the assistance—and which weren’t.

Mistaken in their assumptions, they took their plan to parents who were getting the money, said Cindy Lloyd, office manager at St. Pat’s. The conversation—held on a baseball diamond—did not go well. The petition was never drawn up.

Today, 106 of the 422 students at the K–8 Catholic school near Toledo receive EdChoice Scholarships from the state.

“This is what our Christian faith teaches us,” said Deb O’Shea, the school’s principal, who sees serving voucher students as part of the church’s ministry. Most of St. Pat’s voucher students are poor and are not members of the parish; nearly all would have attended a Toledo Public School or charter school.

O’Shea is adamant that the 2006 decision to accept vouchers has changed the school for the better—making it more diverse racially, socially, and economically.

Once an all-white school, St. Pat’s is now almost one-third minority, and 30 percent of its students are eligible for free or reduced-priced lunches. The school has two students who are Jewish, and three former students are Muslim.

Keeping the school’s Catholic identity is nonnegotiable, however, and that’s a point that Lloyd emphasizes to prospective families.

All children have daily religion classes and attend Mass weekly. “They don’t have to go through the sacraments,” O’Shea said. “But they do have to go through the learning.” O’Shea said families are happy to have their children participate in the religious instruction.

Lloyd said that touring the school with prospective families before they enroll is revealing, because she learns quickly what they’re looking for and can guess whether a child is going to be happy.

“We don’t have a public-school mentality,” she said. “Your shirt is tucked in. It’s, ‘Yes, ma’am’ and ‘No, sir.’”

When children enroll at St. Pat’s as Kindergartners, they typically stay for their entire school career. However, if they enroll later, Lloyd believes they are more likely to change schools.

O’Shea, who is in her third year as principal, said that not everyone in the church agrees that vouchers have benefited the school.

“Some people who belong to our parish think our culture is changing,” she said. “I don’t believe it’s true. I have as many discipline problems with parishioners’ children as with EdChoice children.”

Lloyd agrees. “We have less incidents with people who don’t have to learn the Hail Mary,” she laughed.

While not everyone agrees about the impact of vouchers, the decision to accept them has unquestionably helped to stabilize the school financially, while also taking pressure off the church's budget. (St. Patrick of Heatherdowns Church directs 30 percent of its revenue to the school.)

Having a larger enrollment also helps pay for services—a psychologist, for example—and programs such as band that the school wouldn't otherwise be able to afford.

Because of vouchers, "We're not in as dire straits as some other Catholic schools," said Judy McEwen, the school's assistant principal.

Tuition at St. Pat's is \$4,350, though parishioners pay \$2,700 if they attend Mass regularly, contribute at least \$520 annually, and volunteer fifteen hours per year at the school or church.

O'Shea, fifty-seven, rejects the possibility that St. Pat's would close without vouchers, suggesting that the more likely option would be to downsize further. In its heyday during the 1980s and 1990s, St. Pat's had twice as many students as today—well over 800.

While supporters of vouchers defend them as providing needed competition for poor-performing public schools, O'Shea points out that she has plenty of competition, too.

Toledo has six Catholic high schools, four of which have middle-school academies. When families are deciding where to send their children to high school, they see the end of sixth grade as a natural break, even if they like their experience at the K-8 St. Pat's, O'Shea said.

In addition to the academies, there are three other diocesan Catholic elementary schools within a two-mile radius of St. Pat's.



Kelly Davidson, who is the School Advisory Council president, said academics, athletics, and the parish culture are what draw families to St. Pat's.

"You walk in, and people know your name," she said. "It's like that *Cheers* song."

Multiple parents praised the school's athletic programs, and Davidson said parents are deeply involved in coaching. O'Shea said the school's no-cut policy is important to families that want their children to be involved in sports.

"You don't have to be a 'jock' to play," she said. "You don't have to be the best."

*“You walk in, and people know your name,” she [Davidson] said.
“It’s like that Cheers song.”*

The school does not use vouchers to recruit families, Davidson said. “Our marketing is just around the school—the community feel, the diversity, the foreign languages, the opportunities with our technology. It’s more about selling the school.”

School officials did, however, publicize Ohio’s expansion this year of the voucher program, which applies only to incoming Kindergartners. The new offering, which provides for up to 2,000 vouchers statewide (and will also be available to Kindergartners in 2014–15), differs from the original EdChoice program in that a child doesn’t have to be assigned to a poorly performing school to get the financial assistance. Income is the only qualifying consideration.

Eight children at St. Pat’s ultimately received this particular voucher, although all had registered for Kindergarten at the school before they knew they could get the financial support, O’Shea said.

St. Pat’s gives Ohio’s proficiency tests only to EdChoice students, while all students in grades 3–8 take the Scantron Performance Series twice each year.

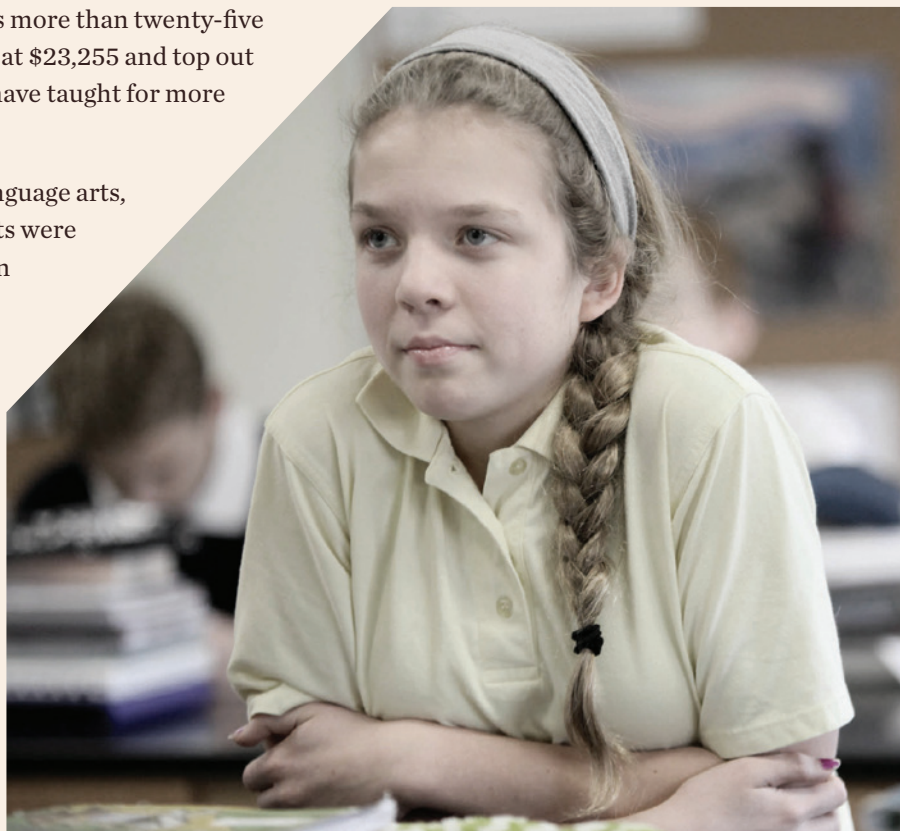
O’Shea and teachers said that the school’s overall Scantron test scores have slipped, but they’re reluctant to attribute this to the infusion of voucher students.

Last year, of the twenty-four voucher students in grades 3, 5, and 8, fifteen students were proficient in reading, while eight were proficient in math.

St. Pat’s classes are small, and any room that has more than twenty-five students has a teacher’s assistant. Salaries start at \$23,255 and top out at \$41,771. Eight of twenty classroom teachers have taught for more than twenty-five years.

Brenda Rayfield, who teaches middle-school language arts, began teaching at St. Pat’s after voucher students were accepted. She said an emphasis in the profession generally on individualized instruction makes it easier to integrate voucher students, who typically aren’t as academically advanced as the non-voucher students at St. Pat’s.

Student of St. Pat’s





*Rita Kijowski, fifth-grade teacher
of St. Pat's*

“Teachers in general are changing the way we teach,” said Rayfield, whose daughter attends St. Pat’s. “We’re not looking at a universal design for learning....Differentiated instruction is a big thing.”

Elena Pappas, the school’s Spanish teacher, sees students in all grades, including the school’s thirty-two preschoolers, at least once a week. The oldest students get the most class time with her, and in seventh and eighth grade, students may elect to take Spanish or French.

All eyes were on Pappas as she bounded around her room, questioning, drilling, and laughing—mostly in Spanish. She exclaimed “excelente” often, and beamed about what the youngest students could recall from the week prior.

“Teachers in general are changing the way we teach,” said Rayfield, whose daughter attends St. Pat’s. “We’re not looking at a universal design for learning....Differentiated instruction is a big thing.”

Rita Kijowski has been at St. Pat’s for thirty-five years where she teaches fifth graders. She said that, during her career, she has had to become “more of a disciplinarian,” and she finds she must repeat instructions more often than she once did. Those changes were occurring before vouchers were introduced, though, she said.

Kijowski remembers a “handful” of families leaving the school after the decision to accept vouchers. But today when parents are upset about something that has happened at school, most will point to the offending child, they “don’t blame” voucher students, she said. “They name the child,” she said. “Our parents are very good.”

New students are on probation for the first quarter, though they’re unlikely to know that.

Fourth-grade teacher Eileen Anning said she’s aware of just two students who’ve ever been asked to leave the school.

“I do think we try to open the doors and meet the needs of everybody,” she said. “It’s a good thing, until you can’t take care of the other kids, too.” On occasion, she said, the school has been slow to address a child who was a discipline problem.

Anastasia Willey has a son in Kindergarten and receives a voucher. “I’m definitely grateful,” she said. If she didn’t get the financial help, her son “probably would be in a charter school.”

Another mother, who was waiting to pick up her six-year-old after school, said that she supports vouchers; however, “if you’re going to give one person a voucher, then everybody should get it....I don’t feel some children should have to pay to get a good education.”

Pat Johnson said she resents the occasional stereotyping of voucher children. An assistant in a St. Pat’s first-grade classroom, Johnson’s grandson receives a voucher and attends a different Catholic school.

There are misperceptions, she said, that “the kids are unruly, that they’re not smart, that parents don’t get involved like the parents who pay tuition.”

Her grandson, she said, is “very into school and extremely well-behaved. Our daughter is beside herself with gladness that he can go to a parochial school.”

Lloyd, who said tardiness is a persistent problem with some voucher families, is the point person when a voucher application gets mistakenly denied or if there’s a paperwork snafu. She has experienced frustrations from time to time, though she’s not particularly critical of the processing that’s required.

One family, she said, had two children in the EdChoice program, but when it came time to enroll the third, the acceptance took forever. “How can two go through and the third not?” she asked.

Another family she has assisted lives with the student’s grandmother and has no bills to prove their residency. They had to get notarized letters about where they reside, but multiple statements were rejected, resulting in the parent having to keep returning to a notary.

Davidson, the School Advisory Council president, said she understands why glitches and roadblocks don’t deter parents.

“If I lived in a declining school district, you can bet your bottom dollar I would be sending my kids to St. Pat’s,” she said.



“If I lived in a declining school district, you can bet your bottom dollar I would be sending my kids to St. Pat’s,” she [Davidson] said.





EDEN GROVE ACADEMY

Cincinnati, Ohio

*“You have to be called
to be here.”*

Chad Harville, principal of Eden Grove



Emanuel Marshall's eighth-grade daughter is one of just thirty students at tiny Eden Grove Academy in Cincinnati who isn't receiving a voucher under Ohio's EdChoice Program.

Marshall has sent all three of his children to the K–8 school, which enrolls 107 pupils, up from ninety-eight in 2012–13.

Though Marshall lives in Cincinnati and his children have been assigned to a so-called “failing” public school under Ohio’s voucher law, he’s not eligible for EdChoice tuition assistance.

That’s because he and his wife enrolled their children in the private Eden Grove Academy *before* the EdChoice program began. The vouchers, worth \$4,250 per elementary student annually, are available only to *new* private school enrollees.

“I’ve been blessed, and we don’t need it,” Marshall, an investment adviser, said of Ohio’s voucher program.

Marshall understands that if he wanted to qualify, he could have withdrawn his children from Eden Grove and enrolled them in Cincinnati Public Schools for a year. Then his family would have been eligible for tuition assistance.

“I thought about it once,” he said, but “I didn’t want to take the chance” that the kids would fall behind.

Nestled on the north side of Cincinnati, the financially strapped Eden Grove is owned by Pillar of Fire International, a six-congregation evangelical church organization based in Zarephath, New Jersey.

Founded in 1901 by Alma White, Pillar of Fire believers were followers of the Methodist Church who thought it had lost its way. A feminist who advocated white supremacy and anti-Semitism, White opened a string of churches, radio stations, and schools across the country. Pillar of Fire has since renounced her racist views and publications.

Eden Grove, whose student body today is 90 percent African American, began as an orphanage and school in 1921. In addition to the school and a 50,000-watt Christian radio station, the organization also has a 150-member church near the Tri-County Mall in the Cincinnati suburb of Springdale.

Asked about the church’s racist past, Marshall, who is African American, said, “I don’t think many people know about it....I have to have a point of demarcation of what was in the past and what they’re doing now.”

Marshall, who has had at least one child attending Eden Grove for sixteen years, said that since the school started taking vouchers, its culture and mission have indisputably changed.

“When I first got there, every parent was fully engaged,” he said. Now, maybe fifteen to twenty families attend Parent Teacher Fellowship meetings.

Ed Myers, who retired from the school in 2012, decided to introduce vouchers to Eden Grove in 2006, the year that the program began in Ohio. The former thirty-year veteran of public schools said Eden Grove had just seventy-six students when he became principal in 1999.

“Eden Grove was a hands-on ministry,” said Myers, who doubled as the physical-education teacher. “We did a lot of painting, a lot of roof repair.”

Myers has no doubt that without vouchers, Eden Grove would have closed. Though for a while Pillar of Fire’s central office sent the school \$6,000 a month, that subsidy ceased in September 2011 when headquarters ran into its own financial problems.

Other than a one-time \$25,000 donation from Carl Lindner Jr., a sometimes-controversial Cincinnati billionaire who died in 2011, the school hasn’t raised any philanthropic money to supplement the tuition it receives from its thirty paying students and the EdChoice money.

Myers, who is not a member of Pillar of Fire, said Eden Grove, which once had a mainly white student body, draws children almost exclusively from the nearby neighborhood—in part, because the transportation schedule that Cincinnati Public Schools offers isn’t convenient for students living farther away.

He raved about the school’s teachers, but said he had concerns about the A Beka curriculum that was used.

“It has a lot of fluff and redundancy,” he said of the popular program favored by evangelical schools. The reading instruction, Myers said, was particularly weak.

Administrators and teachers also give A Beka mixed reviews. The materials are heavily workbook driven, resulting in students spending large chunks of time filling in blanks and glued to their chairs.

Christie Evans, who teaches second grade and was energetically drilling her eight mostly-rapt students on long and short vowel sounds, consonant blends, and “sneaky” silent e’s, said she doesn’t like using all of A Beka’s worksheets. The curriculum “has a lot of busy work,” she said.

“Eden Grove was a hands-on ministry,” said Myers, who doubled as the physical-education teacher. “We did a lot of painting, a lot of roof repair.”

Though the school has always been short on money—the budget is \$482,000 this year—Myers said that when he retired, all teachers had SMART boards and the school had “almost a computer per student.”

The former principal said he supports the state’s requirement that as a condition for receiving vouchers, private schools must administer the state’s proficiency tests to their voucher students and report the results.

“It made sense to me,” Myers said, echoing all private-school administrators who were interviewed for this report.

“He [Myers] has put his own blood, sweat and tears—and his own money—into the school,” Dinkins said. “It was nothing for him to take \$5,000 and put windows in the building.”

Larry Dinkins, a bishop in Pillar of Fire and a former pastor of the Cincinnati church, said Eden Grove Academy is a “ministry” for the church as well as for the staff who work there. The retired truck driver said Myers, when principal, would “forego his salary” for months when money was tight.

“He has put his own blood, sweat and tears—and his own money—into the school,” Dinkins said. “It was nothing for him to take \$5,000 and put windows in the building.”

Chad Harville, who is married to Dinkins’s daughter, followed Myers as principal. The thirty-seven-year-old former production engineer for the Ohio Department of Transportation went back to college for his education degree, took a teaching job at the school for three years, and became principal in the Fall 2011.

“You have to be called to be here,” said the soft-spoken Harville, whose four children also attend Eden Grove. He pointed out that teachers are with their students all day, except for two periods twice a week when they go to art or computer class. There are no planning periods, and children eat lunch in their classroom.

Teachers received a raise this year of \$100 for the first time since Harville has been principal. “It was basically nothing,” he said, noting that few teachers are paid more than \$30,000 annually.

Larry Dinkins, bishop of Pillar of Fire





Margie Helton, seventh- and eighth-grade teacher of Eden Grove

Harville believes that the Ohio Department of Education does a good job administering EdChoice, and he's found that complying with the state's rules has become easier since students' paperwork is now filed online.

He is frustrated, however, that proving residency can be complicated in ways that only low-income parents would experience. One Eden Grove family living in a crime-ridden neighborhood, for instance, has its mail sent to a relative's home. That decision raised questions about whether their children are genuinely assigned to a "failing" Cincinnati public school and thus eligible for a voucher.

Marshall, the parent who has sent three children to Eden Grove, said his only concern about the state's administration is that parents can leave a school too easily, inevitably putting their child behind.



Eden Grove's test scores, which last year lagged behind those of the Cincinnati Public Schools across the board, are "all over the place," conceded Harville. Though unhappy with the average scores, he said that two or three struggling students could significantly drag down a small school's overall results. He said individual test scores show that children are making important progress.

Because Eden Grove's curriculum doesn't align with Ohio's standards, in some grades students are being tested on material they haven't learned yet. "We still think our curriculum is better."

That problem is likely to continue under the new Common Core standards that Ohio has adopted, which Eden Grove is not following, either.

Margie Helton, who teaches seventh- and eighth-grade classes, said she and her fellow teachers agonize about how to help students catch up. One of her new seventh graders this year is reading on a third-grade level, she said. Children are not asked to leave the school for academic difficulties, Helton said, but "obsessive disrespect will get you kicked out."

Audrey Turner-Berry, a Kindergarten teacher who formerly worked in Cincinnati Public Schools, has been teaching at Eden Grove for more than a decade. She said one of her most important jobs is building trust with families. "We're re-educating parents who didn't have a wonderful experience (in school)....Here, there's no confrontation."

Turner-Berry, who is rearing two great nieces and a great nephew, said she is conscious of helping parents learn how to discuss disagreements about matters like how a child is disciplined at school or the importance of attendance.

She said a common complaint from former Cincinnati Public School parents is that they don't want their child on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which they see as a stigma.

"We take our time and slow it down," she said, noting that a child who starts school on an IEP may not always be on one.

"By mid-year, she was right up there with the rest of the students," said Nelson-Paunescu, who receives a voucher and is president of the Parent Teacher Fellowship. She credits smaller class sizes with making the difference for her now fifth grader.

Vanessa Nelson-Paunescu's daughter Nina came to Eden Grove in 2011–12 from Cincinnati's Pleasant Hill Academy and was a year behind academically.

"By mid-year, she was right up there with the rest of the students," said Nelson-Paunescu, who receives a voucher and is president of the Parent Teacher Fellowship. She credits smaller class sizes with making the difference for her now fifth grader.

Lynda Archer's two children attend Eden Grove for free, because her husband is the building and groundskeeper at the complex. The family once lived in Colerain Township, but they moved into Cincinnati so her children would be eligible for vouchers at Eden Grove. After Archer's husband got a job at the church, the family moved back outside of the city.

Rodney Dukes's second-grade son has been attending Eden Grove since Kindergarten.

"I like the teachers," Dukes said in September when he was visiting the school during chapel services, which are held once a week. Concerned that the school doesn't have strong music, art, or physical education classes, Dukes said he is not sure his son will remain at Eden Grove through eighth grade.

"There's a lot the school can't offer," he said.

Harville agrees that Eden Grove falls short on multiple fronts. He knows that he needs to raise more money, increase enrollment, improve students' test scores, and upgrade the facilities. He believes that families stick with the school despite these shortcomings because of its emphasis on discipline, its safe and welcoming environment, and its focus on Biblical values.

"I was always really proud, and still am" of the school, said Myers, the former principal. "If we could clear away the clutter (in the children's lives), it was amazing the progress they would make....There is just something about that place."

APPENDIX

The table outlines the five voucher (or “scholarship”) programs that Ohio has established.

Program	Voucher Eligibility	Year Enacted	Maximum Voucher Amount (2013-14)	Number of Students (2012-13)	Number of Participating Schools or Service Providers (2012-13)
Autism Scholarship	Students who have been identified as a child with autism and have an IEP with their district of residence	2003	Up to \$20,000	2,241	254
Cleveland Scholarship & Tutoring Program	Students living within the geographic boundaries of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District	1995	\$4,250 for grades K-8; \$5,700 for grades 9-12	6,513	36
EdChoice Scholarship Program (designated schools)	Students assigned to or attending a public school building that has been designated on the basis of persistently low performance ratings	2005	\$4,250 for grades K-8; \$5,000 for grades 9-12	17,057	331
EdChoice Scholarship Program (income-based)	For 2013-14, incoming Kindergartners whose family income fell at or below 200 percent of Federal Poverty Guidelines (maximum of 2,000 scholarships available)	2013	\$4,250 for grades K-8; \$5,000 for grades 9-12	N/A	N/A
Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship	Students who have been identified as a child with a disability and who have an IEP with their district of residence	2011	Range from \$7,196 to \$20,000 depending on the category of special need	1,371	215

SOURCES: The data on voucher eligibility and amounts is from the *Ohio Department of Education*. The data on the number of students and schools is from the Alliance for School Choice, *School Choice Now: The Power of Educational Choice*.



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