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**POLITICS**



# DeWine tries to protect school funding after GOP proposes cuts

Lawyer Margaret Wong held a press conference on Tuesday about the six individuals detained by ICE last week.





By: Morgan Trau

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COLUMBUS, Ohio — Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine has taken a stand, deciding in his budget to fully fund public education after some of his Republican colleagues threatened to cut K-12 spending. But educators can't rest yet, as GOP lawmakers are already digging into his proposal.

## **Recap — history**

Ohio's history with school funding isn't the brightest. The Ohio Supreme Court ruled in 1997 in *DeRolph v. State* that the way the state funds schools is unconstitutional, relying too much on property taxes.

Throughout the next three decades, lawmakers went back and forth on policy in an attempt to fix the unconstitutionality. The Ohio Education Association, as well as lawmakers on each side of the aisle, have deemed that it has been unconstitutional since then. However, some Republicans argue that because they are no longer using the struck-down policy, and since nothing else has been deemed "unconstitutional" in court, they argue that, by definition, it can't be considered unconstitutional.

Either way, there has been a bipartisan effort for years to fix the funding system.

House Bill 1, introduced by State Reps. Bride Rose Sweeney (D-Cleveland) and Jamie Callender (R-Concord), in 2021, required \$333 million additional dollars a year for K-12 education funding — or about \$2 billion overall. It is called the Cupp-Patterson Fair School Funding Plan (FSFP).

Their bill was an amended version of policy that passed the House but not the Senate in the General Assembly prior, which was created by former Speaker Bob Cupp (R-Lima) and former state Rep. John Patterson (D-Jefferson). House Bill 1 was finally passed in the budget and signed into law.

The rollout was supposed to take six years and is meant to change how public dollars are provided to K-12 schools. It would give additional support to local districts so they can rely less on property taxes.

The first two years were partially fully funded, the second two years were fully funded, and there are just two years left to go.

## **Recap — timeline**

In early January, comments made by new House Speaker Matt Huffman (R-Lima) and publicized by me angered viewers, readers, parents and education leaders across the state.

"I don't think there is a third phase to Cupp-Patterson," Huffman told reporters. "As to the expectation that those things are gonna go in... I guess the clear statement I can say is I think those increases in spending are unsustainable."

The G.A. from four years ago shouldn't be able to "bind" what the future lawmakers can do, he said.

*See the rest of his comments, including saying that some districts aren't spending money "wisely," below.*

**RELATED:** [Ohio GOP threatens to cut school funding, calling spending 'unsustainable'](#)

I did a follow-up story several days later, in which half a dozen GOP legislators personally reached out, vowing to protect K-12 education.

Those six, and at least 15 others I have spoken to in recent weeks, say that one of their main priorities is supporting public schools.

*This comes as Gov. Mike DeWine would not commit to supporting the current bipartisan funding formula, telling me that "difficult choices" will need to be made.*

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A week after that, I brought the topic back up to Huffman due to the immense backlash. He doubled down.

"If people are upset about it, they still need to address the facts," the speaker said. "I think the current system, especially if we did the third part of what some people are calling the plan, is really unsustainable."

*He called the continuation of the current funding plan a "fantasy."*

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Following my continual reporting, Huffman backtracked on his steadfast effort to cut funding. Our extensive reporting led to massive backlash from lawmakers, and numerous GOP members spoke out privately in late January.

The Republicans went on a caucus retreat at the beginning of the G.A. During the private three-day-long trip, policy was discussed.

I've confirmed with half a dozen representatives that the speaker's team gave a presentation about how the current funding formula needs to be cut due to it being "unsustainable."

"School funding is a longer discussion that I think really cannot be had in earnest and detail until the governor introduces the budget," Huffman told me on Jan. 22.

*After the supporters spoke, numerous Republicans stood up to advocate for fully funding public schools, starting a larger discussion.*

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## **Governor's budget**

Public educators are breathing a sigh of relief — for now.

"We're hopeful that the governor would be aggressive and ambitious in what he puts forward for public education because we know it's not coming from the other side of the aisle," Parma City Schools Superintendent Charles Smialek said.

Smialek has been speaking to me for a month about his concerns stemming from comments made by Huffman, who in early January, was adamant about slashing at least \$666 million in public education spending in this G.A.'s budget.

"The implementing of the Cupp-Patterson plan that many believers say — fait accompli — that we decided four years ago, that in this budget we're going to do that, in my estimation, is a fantasy," the speaker said on Jan. 14.

Huffman explained that this year's budget is going to have significantly less

money due to the federal COVID dollars drying up. And for him, public education is on the chopping block.

"We have really a wide array of opportunities for our students, and without the funding to maintain them, that dwindles," the superintendent said.

It's been a month of me digging in and asking questions to not just Huffman but DeWine.

"Where do you stand on finishing up the Cupp-Patterson plan," I asked the governor in mid-January after Huffman's comments started receiving backlash.

"Look, these are discussions we are going to have," the governor responded, adding that "sometimes these are very, very difficult, difficult choices."

Finally, the governor came to a decision.

"This plan includes a phase-in of the final two years of the General Assembly's school funding plan," DeWine said Monday late afternoon.

"A couple of weeks ago, you told me that you weren't sure about fully funding public education because we are going to have less money in the budget for the next two years," I said. "First question, what changed? And second — what did we end up cutting then?"

He responded that he always focuses on what he thinks is the most important — which includes child welfare and education.

"In my other three budgets, and in this budget, we know going in that both [chambers] have a real interest in what that formula is and so we didn't really change much of the formula knowing that," DeWine said. "I think the main thing that we did, is we said, 'Look it's time that [for] schools that continue to lose students — we not be funding empty desk, that we not be funding phantom students.'

Right now, some districts have guarantees that a portion of their funding will not be reduced, even if their enrollment goes down. In the governor's budget, he slowly reduces that guarantee from 100% to 90% over two years.

"We start down the road to not eliminate... But to take down the guarantee," the governor continued. "That's probably the most significant thing in what we have proposed to the state."

As I did the math in the press conference, it turns out that the budget is not overly restrictive, meaning the excuse of cutting public education due to slimmer funds would be moot.

It is projected at \$108 billion for fiscal year 2026 and \$110 billion for fiscal year 2027 — \$218 billion total. That is a significant amount more than the 135th G.A.'s budget, which was \$191 billion.

I pointed this out to the governor, who acknowledged that this was a "normal" budget and the term 'lean,' as he was using "probably was not accurate."

Smialek said just because the funding formula has been protected by the governor, doesn't mean it will remain.

"I'm not making any predictions on Day 1 about school funding," House Finance Chair Brian Stewart (R-Ashville) responded to me Tuesday.

Stewart explained that the proposal has been well received by some members, but discussions will continue.

It isn't totally clear if DeWine proposed any other major changes to the FSFP due to it not being accessible for journalists or the public in his 'Blue Book' proposal. I have requested additional information from the Office of Budget and Management. This also means it is also unclear whether the private school voucher system will be increasing in any additional way.

[My previous story goes much more in-depth](#) about the voucher program.

In short, Huffman champions the private school voucher system. Under his watch, the state spent roughly [\\$1 billion](#) in public money to send kids to nonpublic schools. Educators like Smialek argue that funding private schools instead of public schools is unconstitutional.

"We've continued to lose ground, and we are hopeful to at least maintain the ground that we stand on right now — but being realistic, we know it's an uphill battle," Smialek said.

The House Finance Committee will hear the budget over the next few weeks before making changes and sending it to the Senate.

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