

# Ohio private school vouchers could see further expansion under new bill

*In Ohio, Senate Bill 44 seeks to allow families to combine multiple scholarships for students with autism or special needs, amid concerns over rising costs.*

**By Laura Hancock**  
**Cleveland.com**

An Ohio Senate bill would allow families to layer taxpayer-funded scholarships for private schools if they have children with disabilities or on the autism spectrum.

[Senate Bill 44](#) could cost Ohio up to \$38 million a year, according to estimates made for a similar bill sponsored last legislative session. Estimates have not yet been made on SB 44.

The bill would be another expansion of private school vouchers, which have dramatically grown over the past decade. The voucher expansion that took effect last school year hiked the price tag of vouchers from \$595 million to [nearly \\$1 billion](#) annually.

SB 44 would apply to families with children who are eligible for the Autism or Jon Peterson Special Needs scholarships. They would be allowed to receive the Ed Choice or Cleveland scholarships on top of their original scholarships.

Under current law, families cannot obtain both scholarships, said state Sen. Sandra O'Brien, an Ashtabula Republican who is sponsoring SB 44.

“Because of this, many students who would otherwise attend a non-government school are not able to afford tuition at that school,” she said in testimony to the Ohio Senate Education Committee on Jan. 29. “Students with these scholarships have effectively been put at a disadvantage because of their need for the autism or Jon Peterson scholarship.”

The maximum Autism Scholarship is \$32,445 for the current school year, said Lacey Snoke, a spokeswoman for the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce, in November, in response to an inquiry from [cleveland.com/The Plain Dealer](#).

The scholarship is available to students who are age 3 through 12th grade who have a private diagnosis of autism or an Individualized Education Program report from a local school district that identifies a student's primary disability as autism. The scholarship is used to pay for special education and related support services.

The maximum Jon Peterson scholarship varies from \$9,585 to \$32,445 per school year, based upon [the primary disability](#) identified in a child evaluation report, which comes after a child receives an IEP, Snoke said at the time.

Students are eligible for the Jon Peterson scholarship in kindergarten through 12th grade. The scholarship is used to pay for special education and related support services.

The full value of the EdChoice and Cleveland vouchers are the same: Up to \$6,167 for grades K-8 and \$8,407 for grades 9-12.

The Cleveland Scholarship is available for students who reside in Cleveland Metropolitan School District's boundaries.

EdChoice has two programs, one is for students who live in the boundaries of low-performing school districts, and the other (known as EdChoice-Expansion) based on a family's income. Higher-income families don't get the full EdChoice-Expansion scholarships, but a portion of them.

This is the second time O'Brien has sponsored the bill.

She sponsored a similar bill in the two-year session that ended in December. During that time, most of the bill's proponents ran private schools, except for two parents whose children had disabilities.

Testifying in support were the Catholic Conference of Ohio, the Ohio Christian Education Network, Heritage Christian School in Canton, Granville Christian School, Ross County Christian Academy, Calvary Christian School in Logan County and Bishop Watterson High School in Columbus.

Lawmakers ran out of time last year to hold opponent testimony.

This year, there's just been one hearing thus far in the Senate Education Committee. Lawmakers appeared open to the idea, though Democrats had questions.

"It is something to stop and think about because there is tuition on top of the services and the Jon Peterson was intended to take care of the services," said state Sen. Catherine Ingram, a Cincinnati Democrat.

Ingram asked O'Brien why she kept describing private schools as "non-government schools."

"The private schools are non-government schools," she said. "The other schools are basically run by government employees schools so that's why I call them that."

"OK, but they take government money," Ingram replied, referring to private schools that participate in the voucher programs.

State Sen. Kent Smith, a Euclid Democrat, asked O'Brien how much average tuition are parents stuck with after the autism or Jon Peterson scholarships are paid. O'Brien said she didn't have that information.