

Vivek Ramaswamy details plans for teacher merit pay, ending state income tax, if elected governor

By **Jeremy Pelzer**
Cleveland.com

COLUMBUS, Ohio—Vivek Ramaswamy launched his campaign for Ohio governor this week with an ambitious list of policy reforms, including phasing out the state's income tax to setting teacher salaries based on merit.

The obvious question now is, how does Ramaswamy plan to do those things if elected?

The 2026 general election is still about 20 months away. Ramaswamy has to make it through a Republican primary against [Attorney General Dave Yost](#), [former school board member Heather Hill](#) and [any other entrants](#) who might join the field. Dr. Amy Acton is the lone [declared candidate on the Democratic side](#) of the governor's race.

During an interview Wednesday, the Columbus-area Republican provided a few more details on the issues he highlighted at his campaign kickoff, as well as on other topics such as the death penalty and plans to expand passenger rail in Ohio.

Here's more on what Ramaswamy said.

Winding down the income tax

Ohio Republicans have significantly slashed the state's income-tax rates and streamlined tax brackets in recent years. Now, there's [growing support among many Ohio GOP lawmakers](#) to phase out the income tax completely.

But getting rid of the income tax would create a massive hole in the state budget. Last fiscal year, nearly 45% of the state's \$21.3 billion in non-Medicaid general-revenue spending came from income-tax revenue, [according to state statistics](#).

To fill that hole, Ramaswamy and state lawmakers would have to significantly raise other taxes (such as the state sales tax) and/or shrink state government to an unprecedented degree.

But Ramaswamy expressed confidence that it can be done through eliminating "waste, fraud and abuse" from within state government and having "creativity with

respect to other sources of revenue” (like taxes). A third factor, Ramaswamy said, is that eliminating the income tax will generate more economic growth – which, in turn, would result in the state collecting more money from other existing taxes.

Ramaswamy noted that nine other states already have no state income tax, including Texas, [where his company recently moved](#).

“This is achievable,” he said. “This is not ‘man on the moon’ stuff.”

The other question is whether there will be the political will to pass such a plan. Republican legislative leaders, including Senate President Rob McColley and House Speaker Matt Huffman of Lima have expressed hesitation to end the income tax, saying the income-tax cuts they’ve passed have already lowered barriers for Ohio to attract major economic-development projects.

Most Democrats have also opposed eliminating the state income tax, arguing that it would disproportionately help wealthier Ohioans and – if it’s paid for with a higher sales tax rate or cuts to government programs – hurt poorer residents.

Merit pay for teachers

One of Ramaswamy’s main policy proposals is to set Ohio teachers’ pay based on merit. Right now, teacher pay scales, as well as raises and other compensation, are generally set on a district-wide basis via collective bargaining agreements negotiated between school district officials and teachers’ unions.

But Ramaswamy says that he wants schools to pay teachers – as well as principals and school administrators -- based on performance, both to pay high-performing teachers more and to make Ohio a “magnet” for educators around the nation.

But how does Ramaswamy want to determine exactly how much merit each Ohio teacher has – and who should decide that – when setting their salary?

Ramaswamy said the answer would be a “composite” of three things: “objective metrics of outcomes for students” (such as tests), parental assessments of teacher quality, and peer reviews.

“The fact that there could be multiple right answers should not stop us from picking one of those right answers,” he said.

In 2011, then-Gov. John Kasich signed a merit-pay measure into law via Senate Bill 5, a controversial collective-bargaining reform law. However, it was overturned by

Ohio voters later that same year, amid widespread criticism of the law's limits on public employees' collective-bargaining rights.

Death penalty

Ohio hasn't executed any Death Row inmate since 2018, as state officials have struggled for years to obtain drugs to use in lethal injections – currently the state's only authorized execution method.

Since taking office in 2019, Gov. Mike DeWine [has maintained a de facto moratorium on executions](#), consistently postponing every scheduled execution date as it approaches on the calendar. DeWine, a Republican, sponsored Ohio's law to resume executions in 1981 but now [publicly refuses to say what he thinks about the death penalty](#).

Yost, Ohio's top law enforcement official and Ramaswamy's chief opposition in the race right now, has railed against stalled executions and [made the case they should resume](#).

Ramaswamy says he thinks the death penalty “is appropriate in the most egregious of offenses,” but only if there is “absolute certainty” about the facts of the case and the law.

He also indicated that he doesn't want to change Ohio's death-penalty laws. “This is not an area where I'm looking to change the status quo in the state,” he said.

Passenger rail expansion

For nearly four years, [the DeWine administration has been exploring whether to expand Amtrak service](#) in Ohio -- both to extend new lines to cities like Columbus and to add more trains in cities like Cleveland that already have Amtrak service.

The expanded service would be paid for with federal money approved in the 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

In 2010, Kasich famously rejected federal funding for an Amtrak line connecting Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati, on the grounds that he opposed using state money to subsidize it.

The new federal program requires less financial buy-in from the states, which would not be required to contribute to the operational cost of Amtrak expansion for the first five years.

Asked whether he would accept federal money to expand Amtrak in Ohio, Ramaswamy didn't give a direct answer. He said that, given he wouldn't take office as governor until January 2027, "a lot of the questions that are being adjudicated today at the state level are going to be resolved."

But, in general, he said, "My job is going to be to do whatever advances the best interests of Ohio."

Focusing on Ohio

Ramaswamy, a 2024 Republican presidential candidate, has until now mostly focused on national issues, both in his numerous media appearances and on his social-media posts.

When asked why he's now running for a state-level office in Ohio, Ramaswamy said many of the issues he's been focused on – such as education reform – are best addressed at the state level, not in Washington, D.C.

"It was actually the natural progression of everything I've done," he said, adding that he started thinking about a gubernatorial run after leaving the presidential race in January 2024.

Ramaswamy has been talked about as a potential presidential candidate at some point in the future. The 39-year-old [told NBC News last weekend](#) that, if elected governor in 2026, he would serve a full four-year term, sitting out a 2028 presidential race that could include Vice President JD Vance, a Cincinnati Republican.

When Ramaswamy was asked Wednesday whether he would serve two terms as governor, he didn't give a Shermansesque statement absolutely ruling out an early departure.

However, Ramaswamy said spending eight years as governor is the timeline he's looking at, saying his agenda "is sufficiently ambitious that it will require two full terms to fully implement." He added that it would be a "very natural" fit for him and his family, noting that his oldest son will be in high school by 2034.

"It will be a rewarding experience for me if we're able to succeed and see our kids grow up into the state that we helped create, in its new chapter," he said. "That's a destination job for me."