

OPINION

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A broken system

The flaws in how Ohio pays for schools have long been apparent, but now cracks are showing in even the most affluent districts

It's been obvious for years that Ohio's method of paying for public schools is broken. Asking hard-pressed property owners to put ever more money in the hat is a recipe for financial gridlock and voter anger.

These problems become even more evident now, when jobs are scarce and state and federal funds are dwindling.

A Plain Dealer editorial board survey of Northeast Ohio school districts with school money issues on the Nov. 8 ballot shows how severely Ohio's school-funding mechanism is damaged. Even excellent districts can no longer expect relief from squeezed property owners.

The Ohio Supreme Court has repeatedly said Ohio's school funding system is unconstitutional.

Yet instead of crafting solutions, state lawmakers have made it worse by revoking business taxes that pay for schools, in part by replacing them with taxes that go to the state and by heaping on unfunded mandates.

At the same time, school vouchers and the shift of money to for-profit community schools have gouged deeply into urban schools' revenues, pushing a few into a spiral of failure.

Last spring — not long after his budget further eroded school subsidies — Gov. John Kasich appointed Barbara-Mattei Smith, an assistant policy director for education, to write Ohio's new school funding formula. She's still sorting through data for her proposal, which should be released early next year, according to a Kasich spokesman.

Whatever it is, it must be far less reliant on property owners' shrinking checkbooks.

The view from school superintendents' offices in Northeast Ohio is frightening. A higher percentage of children who are poor or non-English speakers or disabled are winding up in public

schools — a trend that's also affecting the suburbs.

Meanwhile, even affluent districts are facing problems with voters because of uncertainty about the future of school funding.

The ballot box often produces no relief.

On Nov. 8, nearly half of all school districts in the seven-county Greater Cleveland area are asking voters for more money or to renew old levies or bond issues. Many may have to press their case again and again — in part because of an archaic law that singles schools out with a cap on voted property taxes.

And the assaults keep coming. House Bill 136, which would give school vouchers to all youngsters based on income, could siphon thousands of dollars from already-reeling public school systems.

The bill's sponsor, State Rep. Matt Huffman, a Republican from Lima, defends the bill, saying that it gives families choice and that he doubts there will be "a mass exodus" from the best public schools. He must have never heard about the law of unintended consequences.

Of course, school districts could do a lot of things better. Some districts such as Olmsted Falls are ahead of the game in looking at collaborations and new ways of operating, but all superintendents should be searching for ways to merge or share services with other districts, cities or nonprofit organizations.

The quality of Ohio's public schools is critical to the state's future growth and financial stability, but problems will continue as long as the state's schools are prone to fluctuating and uncertain funding.

Kasich must come up with a new school funding formula that provides a thorough, efficient and, yes, fair educational system for all young Ohioans.