OHIO COMMON GROUND RESEARCH CENTER

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Has Ohio Been Defunding Public Education?

A Two-Decade Analysis of School Funding, Enrollment, Spending, and the Claims Made About Them — With Selected Updates Through FY2025

Prepared by the Ohio Common Ground Research Center

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Contents

Executive Summary

Two slogans dominate Ohio's school-funding debate. One holds that the General Assembly has been "defunding" public education for decades. The other holds that Ohio schools have "never had more money." Both are stated as settled fact. This report does not choose a side. It asks a narrower, answerable question: over the past two decades, what actually happened to the money that supports Ohio's public schools, and which of the commonly repeated claims about that record are supported by primary-source data?

The central finding is structural, and it holds up across every dataset assembled here: several facts underlying apparently contradictory claims turn out to be simultaneously true, because each rests on a different measure. "Funding" is not one number, and "defunding" is not one standard. The same record supports opposite-sounding claims depending on which measure a speaker has in mind — total dollars or dollars per pupil, nominal or inflation-adjusted, the state's share or the combined state-and-local total, money appropriated or the statutory formula funded in full. This report makes those measures explicit and applies each consistently.

On the primary sources: Ohio public-school revenue and spending roughly doubled in nominal terms from FY2000 to FY2022 and rose in real, inflation-adjusted, and per-pupil terms as well — operating expenditure per pupil grew about 26% after inflation even as enrollment fell 8.3%. At the same time, the state's share of total revenue declined (from roughly 42% to 36%), the Fair School Funding Plan has been funded below the amount its own formula calculates during its phase-in (about $742 million below in FY2024), and state payments for nonpublic-school scholarships grew from roughly $175 million (FY2014) to about $1.10 billion (FY2025). Each of those facts is true simultaneously, and each anchors a different side of the public argument.

This report describes the historical record. It does not evaluate whether Ohio's funding system is adequate or recommend policy changes. It documents the record, defines the terms under which each claim is true or false, and identifies where reasonable people, using different definitions, reach different conclusions from the same numbers.

Claims Evaluated at a Glance

Verdicts on the six-point scale defined in Data and Methodology. Verdicts marked "definition-sensitive" change depending on which measure of "funding" the claim is tested against; the body assigns a verdict under each applicable measure.

Claim as commonly stated	Definition-sensitive?	Verdict	Turns on
"Ohio has been defunding public schools for decades."	Yes	Mixed	Dollars vs. state-share vs. formula funding
"Ohio schools have never had more money / record funding."	Yes	Mostly Supported	Nominal / real / per-pupil; COVID funds
"Vouchers are defunding public schools."	Yes	Mixed	Scholarship growth vs. funding mechanism
"Vouchers are bankrupting Ohio public schools."	No	Insufficient Evidence	District-solvency analysis not conducted
"Property taxes rise because the state abandoned schools."	Yes	Mixed	State share vs. HB 920 levy mechanics

Why This Report Matters

School funding is the second-largest spending category in Ohio's biennial general budget, and local property taxes are a major source of school-district revenue. It is also among the most litigated and most frequently reformed areas of state policy, from the DeRolph decisions through the phased Fair School Funding Plan. Because the subject touches nearly every Ohioan, it generates a large volume of public claims that compress a complex fiscal record into a single sentence. When two widely repeated claims appear to contradict each other, the usual reason is not that someone is lying — it is that each uses a different, unstated definition of "funding," and each definition points to a real feature of the record. This report surfaces those definitions and holds each to the same evidentiary standard.

Data and Methodology

Figures are drawn from Ohio and federal primary sources. Because sources report on different bases, this report keeps four funding "universes" distinct and never combines them into a single figure:

- **All-funds (NCES basis).** Total revenue and expenditure for Ohio public schools, from the Ohio Auditor of State's Longitudinal School Finance Study (drawing on NCES data), FY2000–FY2022, and the U.S. Census F-33 survey for cross-state comparison (FY2024).
- **State appropriations.** State GRF/LPEF/LGF expenditure history and enacted biennial budgets (LSC), for state dollars appropriated to education.
- **Foundation-delivered.** DEW district payment reports (SFPR), for state formula aid delivered to districts.
- **Scholarship / community-school payments.** DEW nonpublic-scholarship payment data by program, FY2014–FY2025, and DEW Community Schools Annual Reports.

Data vintages

The most recent complete year differs by series: the all-funds Auditor series runs through FY2022; the Census cross-state survey through FY2024; scholarship payments through FY2025; and NAEP through 2024. Each figure states its year; the report does not treat different vintages as interchangeable.

Verdict scale

Each claim receives one of six verdicts against a specified measure: Supported, Mostly Supported, Mixed, Mostly False, False, or Insufficient Evidence. Where a claim is definition-sensitive, the report assigns a verdict under each applicable measure and does not collapse them into a single grade.

Inflation adjustment and competing figures

Real-dollar figures use the price index and base year stated at the point of use (the Auditor series uses national CPI, June-to-June; FY2000–FY2022 CPI growth was 71.9%). Where credible sources report different figures for the same quantity, both are presented with their bases stated. AI systems, secondary summaries, and advocacy materials are treated as leads toward a primary source, never cited as authority.

Definitions

- **Defunding.** Not adopted as a single definition; it is the object of analysis. The report identifies seven standards — nominal reduction, real reduction, per-pupil reduction, declining state share, purchasing-power erosion, failure to fund a statutory formula in full, and funding that lags growth in educational obligations — and tests the claim against each, though two of them (purchasing-power erosion and defunding relative to obligations) are acknowledged rather than directly assessed.
- **Nominal vs. real dollars.** Nominal is as-reported; real is adjusted to a stated base year with a stated index. A series can rise nominally while falling in real terms.
- **Per-pupil.** Funding of a specified type divided by a specified enrollment count; the enrollment basis is stated wherever a per-pupil figure appears.
- **State share / local share.** The percentage of total public-school revenue derived from state and local (chiefly property-tax) sources, respectively. Federal revenue is reported separately; the three source shares sum to total revenue.
- **Foundation aid.** Core state formula funding to districts, distinct from categorical, facilities, or scholarship appropriations.
- **Scholarship / voucher programs.** State-funded programs supporting nonpublic-school attendance (EdChoice, EdChoice Expansion, Cleveland, Autism, and Jon Peterson), tracked separately from district aid.
- **Community schools (charters).** Public, non-district schools funded through their own statutory mechanism.
- **HB 920 / tax-reduction factors.** The mechanism holding most voted property-tax revenue roughly constant as valuations rise, which bears on why levy activity recurs even when state funding grows. Described, not adjudicated.
- **Fair School Funding Plan (FSFP).** The multi-year formula first implemented in FY2022; the FY2026–FY2027 budget continued its phase-in, with full phase-in scheduled for FY2027.
- **Defunding relative to obligations.** A further definition used in public debate: funding that fails to keep pace with the cost of expanding educational responsibilities (special education, English learners, student mental health, transportation, technology). This report acknowledges the definition but does not test it, since doing so requires a cost-of-obligations series not assembled here; see Future Research.

Section 1. How Ohio Public Schools Are Funded

Districts draw operating revenue from four broad sources: state aid (chiefly the foundation formula, plus categorical and facilities support); local revenue (chiefly voted property taxes, shaped by the HB 920 mechanism); federal funds; and other local receipts. Separate state appropriations fund community schools and nonpublic-school scholarships. Most school-choice programs are funded, per the LSC, by transferring or (since the Fair School Funding Plan) directly paying the per-pupil amount tied to the resident district; the mechanism has changed over the study window and is examined in Section 6. The distinctions matter because most disputed claims turn on which stream a speaker means.

Source: LSC, School Choice Program Funding (Members Brief); DEW district payment reports.

Section 2. Total Funding Over Time — Nominal vs. Real

The most consequential distinction in this debate is between nominal and inflation-adjusted dollars, because a series can set a nominal record while being flat or down in real terms. On the all-funds (NCES) basis, Ohio public-school revenue and operating expenditure both roughly doubled in nominal terms from FY2000 to FY2022 and rose in real terms as well. Excluding one-time federal COVID-19 relief lowers the real growth but does not reverse its direction.

Measure (FY2000 → FY2022)	FY2000	FY2022	Nominal	Real
Total revenue	$15.23B	$30.00B	+96.9%	+14.6%
Total revenue, excl. COVID relief	$15.23B	$28.05B	+84.1%	+7.1%
Operating expenditure	$12.97B	$25.78B	+98.7%	+15.6%
Operating expenditure, excl. COVID	$12.97B	$24.40B	+88.1%	+9.4%

Source: Ohio Auditor of State, Longitudinal School Finance Study (Nov. 2024), all-funds basis; real growth uses national CPI (FY2000–FY2022 CPI +71.9%).

Under the two most common measures a speaker uses for “funding” — total nominal dollars and total real dollars — Ohio public-school funding rose over this period; it did not fall. That does not settle the debate, because other measures (state share, per-pupil, and formula funding) tell a more mixed story, developed in the sections that follow.

Section 3. Enrollment and Per-Pupil Funding

Total funding cannot be read without the number of students it serves. Ohio public-school enrollment fell about 8.3% from FY2000 (roughly 1.84 million) to FY2022 (roughly 1.68 million). Because the denominator shrank, per-pupil figures rose faster than totals — a pattern central to how both the “record funding” and “defunding” claims should be read.

Per-pupil (FY2000 → FY2022)	FY2000	FY2022	Nominal	Real
Total revenue per pupil	$8,293	$17,817	+114.8%	+25.0%
Operating expenditure per pupil	$7,065	$15,314	+116.8%	+26.1%
Operating EPP, excl. COVID relief	$7,065	$14,493	+105.1%	+19.4%

Source: Ohio Auditor of State, Longitudinal School Finance Study (Nov. 2024).

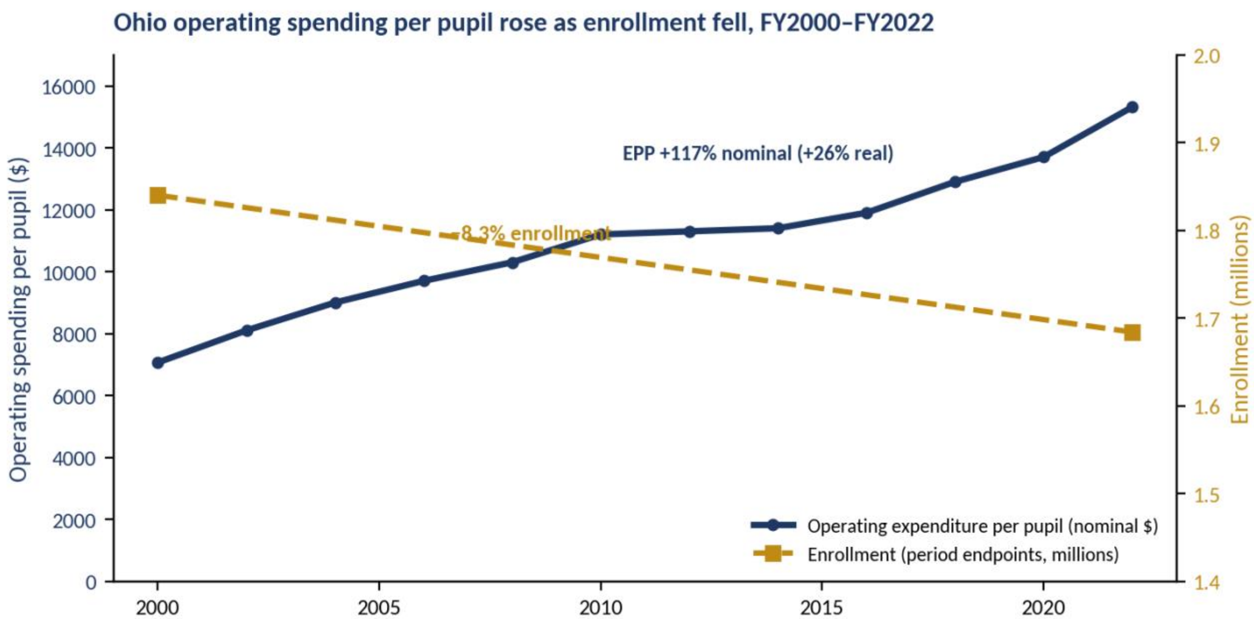

Figure 1. Operating expenditure per pupil (nominal, two-year intervals) and enrollment (period endpoints), FY2000–FY2022. Source: Ohio Auditor of State, Longitudinal School Finance Study (Nov. 2024).

On a per-pupil basis, and after adjusting for inflation, both revenue and operating expenditure grew by roughly a quarter over two decades. This is the single strongest piece of evidence against a literal “defunding” reading and, simultaneously, the strongest support for a “record funding” reading — with the caveat that part of the per-pupil rise reflects falling enrollment rather than new money.

Section 4. State Share vs. Local Share

A distinct version of the “defunding” claim concerns not the dollar total but who pays it — the assertion that the state shifted a growing share of the burden onto local property taxpayers. Tracking the state and local shares of total revenue over the period shows the state’s share did decline, but the offsetting growth came chiefly from federal funds (much of it one-time COVID relief), not from a rising local share, which was roughly flat to slightly lower.

Share of total revenue	FY2000	FY2022	Change	Note
State sources	42.5%	36.3%	−6.2 pts	State share declined
Local sources	51.7%	49.1%	−2.6 pts	Local share ~flat
Federal sources	5.8%	14.6%	+8.8 pts	COVID-inflated at FY2022

Source: Derived from Ohio Auditor of State, Longitudinal School Finance Study (Nov. 2024), total-revenue-by-source, all-funds basis.

In real total dollars, state revenue was about 2.2% lower in FY2022 than FY2000, while state revenue per pupil was about 6.7% higher — again a definition-sensitive split. The share picture qualifies the “state abandoned schools” narrative: the state share fell, but over this window the local share did not rise to absorb it. Section 9 shows that Ohio nonetheless relies on local revenue far more than the national average — a long-standing structural feature at the heart of the DeRolph litigation.

Section 5. DeRolph and the Fair School Funding Plan

Any multi-decade account runs through two events: the DeRolph decisions, which held Ohio's reliance on local property taxes unconstitutional, and the Fair School Funding Plan (FSFP), phased in since FY2022. The Court held that Ohio's system failed the Ohio Constitution's "thorough and efficient" requirement, with its heavy reliance on local property wealth — which DeRolph IV called the system's "fatal flaw" — and the resulting disparities among districts central to that finding. The Ohio Supreme Court decided DeRolph four times — DeRolph I (March 24, 1997), holding the system unconstitutional and ordering a complete overhaul; DeRolph II (May 11, 2000), finding it still unconstitutional and retaining jurisdiction; DeRolph III (September 2001, amended that November into mediation); and DeRolph IV (December 11, 2002), which vacated III, reaffirmed I and II as the law of the case under Article VI, Section 2, and declined further jurisdiction. The Court ended the litigation in 2003 without a final compliance ruling.

The FSFP updates the formula's base-cost inputs (revised from FY2018 to FY2022 data in the FY2024–FY2025 budget) and is being phased in through FY2027. Two features bear directly on the "defunding" question. First, funding rose: traditional-district formula funding was estimated at about $8.06 billion in FY2024 and $8.28 billion in FY2025 (annual increases of 8.9% and 2.7%). Second, the formula is not funded in full during the phase-in: in FY2024 the phased-in amount was about $741.8 million less than the amount the formula itself calculated, and 180 districts drew about $181.2 million in guarantee support. Whether that phase-in gap counts as "defunding" depends entirely on the standard applied — the subject of the next-to-last section. The FY2026–FY2027 budget continued the phase-in; the Department of Education and Workforce reports state funding for primary and secondary education of $13.51 billion in FY2025 — which it describes as the most the state has ever spent on K–12 education — rising to an estimated $13.75 billion in FY2026 and $14.09 billion in FY2027 (a distinct state-funding measure, not the all-funds basis used elsewhere).

Source: LSC, DeRolph v. State (Members Brief); LSC HB 33 Greenbook and "Formula Funding Phase-In and Guarantees" (Members Brief); DEW, Overview of School Funding.

Section 6. Vouchers, Community Schools, and the Funding Mechanism

Claims about vouchers take two distinct forms. The first is that vouchers are "defunding" public schools; that claim is definition-sensitive because it depends on how scholarship funding interacts with district aid. The stronger claim that vouchers are "bankrupting" public schools is a separate solvency proposition requiring different evidence, evaluated later in this report. Both the dollar growth and the mechanism must be stated. State scholarship payments grew from roughly $174.8 million in FY2014 to about $1,095.2 million in FY2025 — roughly a sixfold increase — driven overwhelmingly by the income-based EdChoice Expansion program, whose payments rose especially sharply after eligibility was opened to all incomes.

Scholarship program	FY2014	FY2018	FY2022	FY2024	FY2025
EdChoice (traditional)	$70.4M	$107.7M	$212.6M	$272.3M	$283.2M
EdChoice Expansion	$3.8M	$39.0M	$102.9M	$405.3M	$492.9M
Cleveland	$28.1M	$37.4M	$46.0M	$53.4M	$55.2M
Autism	$50.5M	$84.4M	$116.5M	$137.4M	$160.0M
Jon Peterson (JPSN)	$22.0M	$55.7M	$76.6M	$95.3M	$104.0M
Total, all programs	$174.8M	$324.2M	$554.5M	$963.8M	$1,095.2M

Source: DEW nonpublic-scholarship payment data, paid-participant payments by program, FY2014–FY2025.

On the mechanism: before the Fair School Funding Plan, scholarship amounts were deducted from (transferred out of) the resident district's foundation aid. Under the FSFP (FY2022 onward), the LSC reports these became direct state payments rather than deductions. That distinction is decisive for the claim: under the current mechanism, a scholarship payment does not mechanically subtract from the resident district's state allocation, and district formula funding rose over the same years (Section 5). What the data unambiguously show is rapid growth in public dollars flowing to nonpublic scholarships; what they do not show, under the post-FSFP mechanism, is a dollar-for-dollar reduction of district funding.

Community schools (charters) are a separate public, non-district sector funded directly under Ohio's school-funding framework on the basis of the students they educate. In FY2025, Ohio had 340 community schools enrolling 119,266 students; consistent with the mechanism above, the Department of Education and Workforce states the current formula generally does not deduct or transfer a resident district's aid for these students. A multi-year community-school funding series is identified in Future Research.

Source: DEW, 2025 Community Schools Annual Report; DEW, Overview of School Funding.

Section 7. Where the Money Goes

A change in total funding says nothing by itself about where the money went. On a per-pupil, inflation-adjusted basis, the largest categories of operating spending all grew, but at different rates. Salaries and benefits together accounted for about 70.9% of the increase in operating expenditure per pupil. Purchased services had the fastest percentage growth of any object, but because salaries and benefits are far larger categories, their combined growth accounted for most of the overall increase.

Operating EPP (FY2000 → FY2022)	FY2000	FY2022	Nominal	Real
Instruction	$4,156	$8,982	+116.1%	+25.7%
Support services	$2,653	$5,843	+120.3%	+28.2%
Salaries (object)	$4,488	$8,352	+86.1%	+8.3%
Benefits (object)	$1,248	$3,236	+159.4%	+50.9%
Purchased services (object)	$643	$2,289	+255.9%	+107.1%

Source: Ohio Auditor of State, Longitudinal School Finance Study (Nov. 2024), operating expenditure per pupil.

The Auditor attributes the majority of per-pupil growth to salaries and benefits and separately found that staffing per 1,000 students rose about 11.5% from 2006 to 2022 even as enrollment fell — pointing to both higher compensation and greater staffing intensity rather than any single administrative category. This illustrates a distinct sense of "purchasing-power erosion": because mandatory cost categories such as employee benefits can absorb a growing share of revenue, rising costs in those categories can create pressure on discretionary resources even while nominal and real per-pupil funding are rising.

Section 8. Funding and Student Outcomes

Where funding rose, a natural question is whether measured outcomes rose with it. This section reports outcome trends alongside funding, with an explicit caution: co-movement is not causation, in either direction, and this report does not estimate a causal effect of funding on achievement. On NAEP, Ohio's average scale scores were flat to modestly lower over the window, with reading declines in both grades since 2002.

NAEP average scale score (Ohio)	2002	2022	2024	U.S. 2024
Grade 4 reading	222	219	216	214
Grade 8 reading	268	262	260	257

Source: NCES, 2024 Reading State Snapshot Reports, Ohio (grades 4 and 8).

The Ohio Auditor’s review of NAEP math and reading, 2000–2022, found scores rose modestly through the early 2010s, then declined, with pandemic-related losses by 2022 — and observed that although per-pupil spending rose beyond inflation, assessment scores did not follow suit. On completion, Ohio’s statewide four-year graduation rate for the Class of 2024 was about 88%, and post–high-school outcome data are tracked in the underlying dataset; a multi-year graduation trend is identified in Future Research. No causal relationship is asserted.

Source: NCES NAEP snapshots; DEW district four-year graduation-rate file (2025).

Section 9. Ohio in Regional and National Context

Whether Ohio’s trajectory is high or low is partly a relative question. On the U.S. Census F-33 survey (FY2024, a common basis across states), Ohio’s per-pupil current spending of about $17,257 was just below the national average of $17,619 — mid-pack among neighbors, above Indiana, Kentucky, and West Virginia, and below Michigan and Pennsylvania. The more distinctive feature is the revenue mix: Ohio funds schools far more from local sources, and less from the state, than the nation as a whole.

FY2024 (Census F-33)	Per-pupil current	State share	Local share	Federal
United States	$17,619	45.2%	43.2%	11.6%
Ohio	$17,257	34.6%	53.6%	11.8%
Indiana	$13,622	55.9%	32.7%	11.4%
Michigan	$18,314	56.7%	32.4%	10.9%
Pennsylvania	$21,091	37.5%	52.4%	10.1%
Kentucky	$14,596	45.9%	37.0%	17.1%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Annual Survey of School System Finances (F-33), FY2024 summary tables.

Census per-pupil figures are nominal and are not adjusted for interstate differences in cost of living; a higher figure does not by itself indicate greater real educational resources.

Ohio’s local share (about 54%) sits well above the national average (about 43%) and above most neighbors except Pennsylvania. This heavy local reliance is the structural feature the DeRolph decisions identified, and it frames the property-tax claim evaluated below: Ohioans do carry an unusually large local share, but whether that reflects the state “abandoning” schools over the study window is a separate question the share trend (Section 4) does not support.

Evaluating the Claims

Each claim is tested measure by measure, because the honest answer to “is this true?” is frequently “under this definition yes, under that definition no.”

“Ohio has been defunding public schools for decades.”

Verdict: Mixed

Under the dollar measures, the claim is not supported: total funding, real funding, and per-pupil funding all rose from FY2000 to FY2022. Under two other measures it has genuine support — the state’s share of total revenue declined, and the current formula is funded below what it calculates. The composite is therefore Mixed, and which way an individual reader leans depends on the standard they apply.

- **Total / real / per-pupil dollars:** False — all rose materially (revenue +14.6% real; EPP +26.1% real per pupil)
- **Declining state share:** Supported — state share fell ~42.5% → 36.3%; real total state revenue −2.2%
- **Shifted to local property taxpayers:** Not supported for FY2000–FY2022 — local share was flat-to-lower; the higher federal share more than offset the state-share decline at the FY2022 endpoint, largely from one-time pandemic relief
- **Statutory formula funded in full:** Supported — FSFP phased-in funding was ~$741.8M below the formula in FY2024

“Ohio schools have never had more money / have record funding.”

Verdict: Mostly Supported

True under nominal, real, and per-pupil measures, with two caveats: recent highs are lifted by non-recurring federal COVID relief (excluding it lowers real revenue growth from +14.6% to +7.1%), and per-pupil records partly reflect an 8.3% enrollment decline rather than new money.

- **Nominal total / per-pupil:** Supported — FY2022 at or near series highs across the study period; DEW reports FY2025 state spending as an all-time high
- **Real total:** Supported — +14.6% (or +7.1% excluding COVID relief)
- **Real per-pupil:** Supported — +25.0% revenue; +26.1% operating expenditure

“Vouchers are defunding public schools.”

Verdict: Mixed

This claim is definition-sensitive. The factual core — rapid growth in public dollars flowing to nonpublic scholarships, now exceeding $1 billion annually — is supported. The mechanical core — that scholarship payments reduce district funding dollar-for-dollar — is not supported under the current formula: since FY2022 scholarships are paid directly by the state rather than deducted from resident-district aid (a point the Department of Education and Workforce states directly), and district formula funding rose over the same period. The composite is therefore Mixed.

- **Scale and growth:** Supported — ~$174.8M (FY2014) → ~$1,095.2M (FY2025); EdChoice Expansion the driver

- **Funding mechanism:** Deduction pre-FSFP; direct state payment since FY2022 — no dollar-for-dollar district deduction now
- **District foundation aid:** Rose over the same years (~$8.06B FY2024; ~$8.28B FY2025)

"Vouchers are bankrupting Ohio public schools."

Verdict: **Insufficient Evidence**

"Bankrupting" is a solvency claim, distinct from "defunding." This report does not assess it: it contains no statewide analysis of district fiscal-emergency status, deficits, cash balances, or five-year forecasts, and no causal link between scholarship payments and district insolvency. The verdict is therefore Insufficient Evidence — the report has not performed the district-solvency analysis a "bankrupting" claim requires; that analysis is identified in Future Research.

- **District solvency:** Not assessed — no statewide fiscal-emergency, deficit, cash-balance, or five-year-forecast analysis conducted

"Property taxes keep rising because the state abandoned schools."

Verdict: **Mixed**

This claim bundles a premise and a cause. The premise — that the state pulled back proportionally — has real support: the state's share of total revenue fell about six points and real total state revenue was slightly lower in FY2022 than FY2000. The causal conclusion is weaker: over FY2000–FY2022 the local share did not rise as the state share fell, and rising property-tax bills reflect a multi-part chain — valuation growth, the HB 920 tax-reduction mechanism (which limits the additional revenue rising existing-property valuations produce and can contribute to recurring local levies), local levy decisions, and inflation — that the state-share trend alone does not isolate. The verdict is therefore Mixed rather than a clean confirmation or rejection.

- **State vs. local share:** State share fell, but local share did not rise to absorb it (Section 4)
- **HB 920 mechanics:** Tax-reduction factors limit the added revenue many voted levies draw from rising existing-property values, which can contribute to recurring levy requests; this report does not estimate HB 920's share of levy activity versus state funding, district costs, or local decisions

What Would Constitute "Defunding"?

Because "defunding" has no single agreed meaning, a reader cannot judge the claim without knowing which standard applies. Each standard below is a coherent use of the word; each yields its own answer for Ohio; and a speaker who moves between them can make the claim appear both proven and refuted in one conversation.

Standard	Under this standard, "defunding" means…	Ohio, FY2000–FY2022
Nominal reduction	Fewer unadjusted dollars	No — roughly doubled
Real reduction	Fewer purchasing-power dollars	No — up ~15% (total)
Per-pupil reduction	Fewer dollars per student	No — up ~25–26% real
Declining state share	State pays a smaller proportion	Yes — ~42.5% → 36.3%
Purchasing-power erosion	Funding lags school-specific input costs	Not directly assessed — some inputs (esp. benefits, +50.9% real) rose faster than CPI

Standard	Under this standard, "defunding" means…	Ohio, FY2000–FY2022
Unfunded statutory formula	Formula not funded in full	Yes — ~$742M short in FY2024
Defunding relative to obligations	Funding lags growth in mandated responsibilities	Not assessed — see Future Research

This report designates none of these as the "correct" definition. It reports the answer under each. The reason the public debate is intractable is visible in the table: on three standards the answer is "no," on two it is "yes," and two this report does not directly assess — all applied to the same record.

Interpretive Considerations

- **The disagreement is largely definitional.** Most of the apparent conflict between "record funding" and "defunding" dissolves once the measure is specified; both describe true features of the same record.
- **Nominal growth can coexist with real per-pupil pressure.** Rising totals do not by themselves establish more real classroom resources, especially where benefit costs grew fastest.
- **One-time federal funds distort recent comparisons.** COVID relief lifts FY2020–FY2022 figures; excluding it lowers real growth without reversing it.
- **Co-movement is not causation.** Funding and outcomes are reported side by side only; no causal direction is asserted.
- **Scholarship growth and district funding both rose.** Under the post-FSFP direct-payment mechanism, the two are not a simple zero-sum transfer.

Limitations and What This Report Does Not Claim

- **Descriptive, not evaluative.** No conclusion on whether funding is adequate, fair, or wise, and no recommendation to any officeholder, chamber, or party.
- **Selected claims.** A defined set meeting the inclusion criteria; other claims and questions may be addressed in future revisions.
- **No causal estimate.** The outcomes section reports trends alongside funding, not a causal relationship.
- **Mixed data vintages.** The all-funds series ends FY2022; cross-state is FY2024; scholarships FY2025. Figures are not treated as interchangeable across bases or years.
- **Community-school figures pending.** The community-school funding series is to be finalized from DEW annual reports before release.

Future Research

- Extend the all-funds per-pupil and share series past FY2022 using Census F-33 (FY2023–FY2024) on the same basis.
- Conduct a statewide district-solvency analysis (fiscal-emergency status, deficits, cash balances, and five-year forecasts) to test the distinct "bankrupting" claim, which this edition does not assess.
- Add a multi-year community-school funding series (DEW annual reports) and a statewide graduation-rate and post–high-school trend from the DEW files.

- Assess the "defunding relative to obligations" definition by assembling a cost-of-mandated-responsibilities series (special education, English learners, transportation, and related categories) against available resources.
- Track FSFP phase-in through FY2027 and whether the formula is funded to its calculated amount.

Sources

- Ohio Auditor of State, Longitudinal School Finance Study: A Special Report (Nov. 2024) — all-funds revenue, expenditure, per-pupil, enrollment, CPI.
- U.S. Census Bureau, Annual Survey of School System Finances (F-33), FY2024 summary tables — cross-state per-pupil and revenue by source.
- Ohio Department of Education and Workforce — nonpublic-scholarship payment data (FY2014–FY2025); Community Schools Annual Reports; district graduation and post–high-school files.
- Ohio Legislative Service Commission — DeRolph v. State (Members Brief); School Choice Program Funding (Members Brief); HB 33 Greenbook; Formula Funding Phase-In and Guarantees (Members Brief); enacted-budget and GRF expenditure history.
- Ohio Department of Taxation — property-tax statistics and tax-reduction-factor (HB 920) data, for the state/local share and levy discussion.
- DEW district payment reports (SFPR) — for state formula-aid amounts delivered to districts.
- NCES, National Assessment of Educational Progress — 2024 Ohio Reading State Snapshot Reports (grades 4 and 8).
- Ohio Supreme Court — DeRolph decisions (1997–2002). U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics — CPI (inflation adjustment).

Conclusion

The evidence assembled here points to a single structural conclusion: "funding" is not one number and "defunding" is not one standard. Ohio public-school funding rose over the past two decades in total, real, and per-pupil terms; at the same time the state's share of that funding fell, the current formula is funded below what it calculates, state spending on nonpublic scholarships grew roughly sixfold, and Ohio still leans on local property taxes far more than the nation. Each fact is true, and each anchors a different claim in the public debate. By naming the competing definitions and applying each consistently, this report lets Ohioans see where the numbers point and where reasonable people diverge. It reaches no conclusion about what Ohio should do next; that question belongs to Ohioans and their elected representatives, and to the organizing arm of Ohio Common Ground, not to this Research Center product.

Revision History

This is a living document. Superseded versions are preserved in the OCG Research Library, and each revision is logged below.

- **Version 1.0 — August 11, 2026 —** Initial publication.