

ANOTHER VIEW

Transylvania tax payers need to be protected

School choice is one of the most polarizing issues in politics today. Proponents see choice as a key to unlock the full educational potential for America's children; opponents see it as a Trojan Horse hiding a more sinister aim of undermining America's public school system.

Neither view is strictly accurate. On the one hand, private schooling is not a panacea for all students; nationally, half of all students who leave public schools for private schooling come back to public schools within three years, according to a pre-pandemic study. At the same time, public schools are not losing students en masse to private options; the total percentage of students enrolled in private schools remains below 10%, despite concerted action from policymakers to expand choice options.

So it would seem, at least to this point, that school choice is neither the miracle education elixir portrayed by its proponents nor the public education death knell portrayed by its opponents. Opting into the private school system shouldn't mean forsaking the public school system; nor should embracing public schools mean there aren't valid reasons for other families to go private.

Yet there is a huge gulf in attitudes, which makes it difficult to objectively discuss school choice issues. This in turn leads to decisions and policies which can be detrimental or even catastrophic.

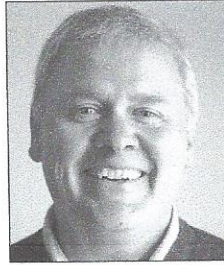
I bring this up because Transylvania County is facing a potentially disastrous impact related to a proposed change in how North Carolina treats its school voucher programs. And our local leaders are refusing to even discuss it.

Let me explain. The North Carolina General Assembly is currently considering companion bills – S406 and H823 – which will vastly increase the scope of the state's voucher system, in essence providing vouchers to any parents, regardless of income, to subsidize their children's enrollment in a private school.

There is an obvious equity issue here – under this scheme, families with two children utilizing vouchers would effectively pay no 2023 state income tax at any income level below \$261,000, assuming a 4.6% state tax rate. Their tax obligation would, of course, be shifted to the rest of us.

But another issue is the reduction in public school state funding created by the expansion.

Surprisingly, the General Assembly did no study of this prior to the bills' introduction, but an analysis by the state's Office of State Management and Budget forecasts an annual decrease of nearly a quarter of a billion dollars in state funding of local school systems.



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Transylvania County could lose \$600,000 annually, which is equivalent to a full penny on our tax rate.

A small percentage of that loss would be offset by reduction in variable operating costs. But because student loss is never concentrated, the opportunity for cost reduction is slight. The overwhelming majority of that \$600,000 would be eaten by us, the local taxpayers.

Some other states which have enacted similar voucher expansion schemes have included financial supplements for local school districts, to prevent such reductions in school revenues. Unfortunately, the North Carolina state legislators have chosen not to include similar provisions to protect North Carolina's local systems.

Which leaves our local elected officials to fight for our funding. You might think blowing such a hole in the Transylvania school budget would send alarm bells ringing, but you would be wrong. In fact, our local elected officials have been silent on this issue.

It's not that they are unaware of it; they know it's projected to potentially happen. But they have not talked about it in open meetings. This silence is, frankly, odd. It's never wise to ascribe motives or intent to others' actions, but in this case it can be said the silence from our local officials is ill-advised and potentially shattering.

Instead of silence, an easy action for both the Board of Education and the Board of County Commissioners would be to insist to our district's legislators, Sen. Kevin Corbin and Rep. Mike Clampitt, that a make-whole provision be inserted in S406/H823 so that local funding does not fall victim to voucher expansions.

This would put North Carolina in line with other states and protect Transylvania County Schools' ability to provide quality education for our children.

But time is of the essence – the Legislature is hopeful to adjourn by the end of June.

Our representatives need to act now to protect the taxpayers of Transylvania County.

Mike Hawkins is a former chairman of the Transylvania County Board of Commissioners.