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No Just Poor Kids Receiving Vouchers, Higher-income Students are Also Reaping Benefits of Program, Data Show

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Ohio's leaders sold the Cleveland voucher program in 1995 as a way to help children from low-income families escape Cleveland public schools. The program, however, increasingly underwrites the tuition for higher-income families, according to state Department of Education data. Some of the families already had enrolled their children in private schools and had paid tuition.

This school year, state enrollment numbers show that 28 percent of the children receiving vouchers come from families with income twice the rate of poverty and far above the Cleveland median income of \$21,015. For example, a family with two adults and two children can earn more than \$35,920 and be among the 28 percent receiving vouchers, according to the rules of the program.

That far exceeds the income numbers state leaders cited after the first year of the program. In 1997, then-Gov. George Voinovich and others said the average income of voucher program participants was between \$7,000 and \$10,000 and was evidence that poor families were using the program.

Voinovich said poor families who wanted to escape Cleveland's public schools should have the same opportunity as wealthy families. This year, 31 percent of the children in the program come from homes in poverty.

The state pays 85 percent of the cost of tuition, up to a maximum payment of \$2,250, for families earning less than two times the poverty level. For families earning more than twice the poverty rate, the state pays 75 percent of the tuition.

``This is worse than I thought," Michael Charney, an executive board member of

the Cleveland Federation of Teachers, said yesterday. "I thought there would be a good-faith effort to make sure the poorest of the poor got the religion school tuition paid for by the state."

Mary Anne Sharkey, a spokeswoman for Gov. Bob Taft, said Taft was unaware of the figures. She said the program still is an experiment and has Taft's support.

On Wednesday, the voucher program will receive the supreme test. After being declared unconstitutional in U.S. District Court in 1999 and in the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in 2000, the nine justices of the U.S. Supreme Court will hear oral arguments in the case.

The primary issue is whether the program encourages religion. This year, 4,457 children received vouchers to attend private schools. All but 59 of the children attend religious schools. Last year, only 18 were in nonreligious schools.

That means that most of the \$6 million to be spent this year on vouchers will go to religious schools. The Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring office -- part of state government -- runs the program. State law requires the office to grant vouchers first to low-income families already in the private schools and to siblings of children already in private schools. Low-income is defined as those earning less than twice the rate of poverty.

A lottery is held to allocate additional seats to low-income applicants. In November, the office looks at the amount of money still available in the budget and awards vouchers to applicants who previously were disqualified by the income criteria.

The Department of Education, which speaks for the voucher office, said that many of those children already are enrolled in the school and were eligible because their parents submitted an application earlier in the year.

In addition, some of the families may have enrolled while they were in a lower-income bracket, and their income has increased.

In some of the church-related schools, the church offers scholarships to help reduce tuition.

It is possible that some of the children who already were enrolled were paying a reduced tuition, but when they received the voucher, they had to pay the higher, full tuition rate, according to a spokesman for the Cleveland Diocese.

He could not say specifically whether there were any such cases. The effect would be that the state would be paying the highest tuition rate at each school.

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