

West Virginia's HOPE Scholarship Is a Subsidy for the Already-Decided

The West Virginia HOPE Scholarship was sold to the public on a simple and compelling promise: that families trapped in underperforming public schools would finally have the financial means to seek a better education elsewhere. That promise has a compelling logic. However, HOPE's own utilization data tells a different story, which should trouble taxpayers who believed they were funding an opportunity, not an entitlement.

Over fifty percent of HOPE Scholarship recipients were already enrolled in private school before receiving the scholarship. They did not choose private education because of HOPE. They chose private education before HOPE existed and then collected a public subsidy for a decision they had already made. These families who chose a private education made this election regardless, and were clearly capable of financing their children's education without government assistance.

This is not school choice. This is a wealth transfer.

The But-For Problem

Sound public policy requires that a subsidy actually cause the behavior it intends to incentivize. An economic development tax credit that rewards a company for relocating jobs that were coming anyway is a waste. A housing voucher that goes to a family that could afford market rent without it is a misallocation. The HOPE Scholarship, as currently administered, fails this basic "but-for" test for the majority of its beneficiaries.

If over fifty percent of recipients were already in private school, the scholarship did not expand their choices. It simply reduced their tuition bill at public expense. The state of West Virginia is paying families to do what they were already doing.

Who Bears the Cost

Every dollar flowing to a family already committed to private education is a dollar that cannot reach a family genuinely unable to afford it. West Virginia's public school system, already in dire financial straits, loses per-pupil state funding for each student who exits, regardless of whether that exit was caused by HOPE or preceded it by years.

When the program rewards the pre-committed majority, the net effect is a reallocation of scarce state education dollars away from public schools and toward families who demonstrated, by their own prior conduct, that they needed no incentive to leave. The children who remain in public schools, who are disproportionately lower-income, rural, and without private school options nearby, bear the consequences.

The Affluence Problem

Private school enrollment in West Virginia, as nationally, skews heavily toward higher-income households. Families with the means and motivation to pay private tuition out of pocket year after year, before HOPE existed, are not the families the school choice movement was built to serve. Extending a public scholarship to these families does not democratize education; it subsidizes an established preference.

The program effectively asks working-class West Virginians to help reduce tuition costs for families who are, on average, better positioned financially than those whose children remain in public schools. That is a difficult result to reconcile with the equity arguments advanced in HOPE's favor.

No Accountability, No Return

Public school students are subject to state curriculum standards, certified teachers, standardized assessments, and civil rights protections. HOPE scholarship funds flow to private institutions and homeschool families with no equivalent accountability framework.

When a scholarship reaches a family that genuinely needs it to access private education, one might argue that those accountability trade-offs are justified by the expansion of opportunity. When it reaches a family already paying private tuition voluntarily, no such justification exists. The public is simply funding a private preference with no assurance of any educational return.

A Fixable Design Failure

This is not intended as an argument against school choice as a principle. It is an argument that HOPE, as designed, fails to target the families it was meant to serve. A program committed to genuine choice expansion would, at a minimum, require:

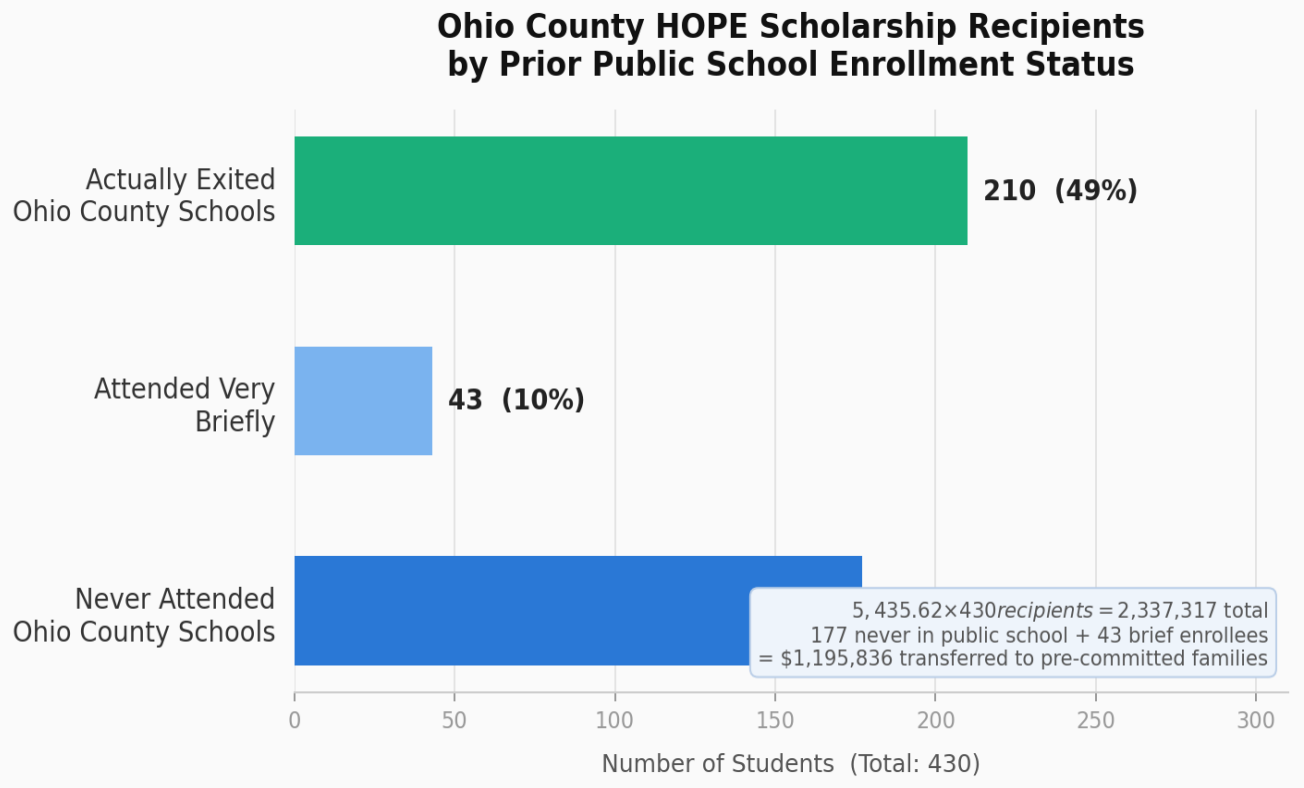
- A prior public school enrollment period before eligibility, confirming the student was actually in the system that the scholarship is meant to offer an alternative to;
- Income-based eligibility thresholds or means-tested benefit amounts, ensuring subsidy depth tracks financial need; and
- Prospective rather than retroactive application, so that the scholarship incentivizes a choice rather than rewards one already made.

Without these guardrails, the HOPE Scholarship is less a vehicle for parental empowerment than a tuition discount program for families who had already empowered themselves, funded by a state that cannot adequately resource the public schools serving the children left behind.

The Ohio County Picture: A Case Study in Misallocation

The statewide pattern is not abstract. In Ohio County, West Virginia, the HOPE Scholarship data is even more striking. Of 430 total scholarship recipients in the county, only 210, just 49%, actually exited Ohio County Schools. Another 177 recipients never attended Ohio County public schools at all. An additional 43 were enrolled for only a very brief period before departing, a tenure so short it strains credulity to characterize it as a meaningful choice to leave.

In other words, 51% of Ohio County HOPE recipients had no meaningful connection to the public school system.



The financial consequence is direct and quantifiable. Each HOPE Scholarship carries a value of \$5,435.62. The 220 Ohio County recipients who never genuinely left public school, made up of the 177 who were never enrolled and the 43 who were enrolled only briefly, represent a combined wealth transfer of \$1,195,836.40 in public education funds redirected to families who had already self-selected out of the public system.

That \$1.2 million did not expand educational opportunity in Ohio County. It did not rescue a single child from a school that was failing them. It subsidized private school tuition for families who had demonstrated, by their own prior conduct, that they neither needed nor required public assistance to make that choice. Meanwhile, Ohio County Schools absorbed the per-pupil funding reduction for each of those departing students, or those students who never arrived in the first place.

West Virginia families who genuinely need help choosing something better for their children deserve a scholarship program that actually reaches them. Right now, the majority of HOPE dollars are going somewhere else entirely, depriving public schools from receiving the funding that it needs to provide a thorough and efficient system of free schools.