



HOUSE FINANCE SUBCOMMITTEE, PRIMARY & SECONDARY EDUCATION, HB 33
(Ed. Choice/Scholarships), March 16th, 2023

Chair Richardson, Ranking Member Isaacsohn, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for holding this hearing and for the opportunity to provide testimony.

My name is Donovan O’Neil, and I am the State Director for Americans for Prosperity – Ohio (AFP). As one of the largest grassroots organizations in the country, AFP is driving long-term solutions to some of the country’s biggest problems. Our organization, and its thousands of activists across Ohio, are dedicated to breaking barriers that stand in the way of people realizing their full potential. Removing or reducing these barriers, in whatever forms they take, helps move our society toward one of mutual benefit, where people succeed by helping others improve their lives and by transforming their communities. The main operating budget, House Bill 33, presents this General Assembly with a tremendous opportunity to make major progress for students and families by moving Ohio closer to being a state that funds students, not systems.

AFP believes that the purpose of our education systems needs to shift from *schooling* to *learning*, from a one-size-fits-all system rooted in standardization and uniform outcomes to normalizing a multitude of learning approaches and outcomes. That purpose will lead to more empowerment for all children to discover how their unique talents and interests can create value in society, allowing them to live lives filled with meaning and purpose. AFP is highly supportive of the ‘as introduced’ version of HB 33 regarding Governor DeWine’s proposal to expand school choice. As this committee is fully aware, that proposal includes expanding eligibility for the EdChoice Scholarship to 400 percent of the federal poverty level, which for a family of four equates to a household income of approximately \$111,000 per year. If that is all the further this body is willing to go during this budget process, AFP would consider it good progress, but I would argue that it would only be a good first step.

If you were to leave the Statehouse today and travel only two and half hours south down U.S. Route 23 to Huntington, WV, you would discover that one of Ohio’s neighboring states has

already taken several steps ahead by implementing a the universal educational savings account (ESA) approach to education delivery through its [Hope Scholarship](#). Others states, such as Arizona, Iowa, Utah, and most recently Arkansas have already passed legislation to move to universal ESA systems in the past several months, and others, such as Florida, are on the cusp of doing so with bipartisan support. There is another proposal currently before the Ohio House, HB 11, the Backpack Bill, that would help Ohio keep pace with those states that are innovating their education systems to fund students instead of systems. Much discussion during this current Budget cycle and at the beginning of this General Assembly has, rightly so, centered on workforce development, workforce shortages, and the fact that employers cannot find enough quality candidates to fill open positions. Surely there are a variety of factors inflaming these problems; one of those factors is, that for far too many students and families, our current education system falls short of meeting their needs and inadequately prepares them for what comes next after their formal education. Setting Ohio's children up for future success and creating more education options is at the heart of our state's workforce issue, and doing whatever can be done during this budget cycle to move the needle as much as possible should be considered necessary.

Opponents of ESAs have begun pointing to the costs that could possibly be incurred under a new approach like the one put forward in HB 11 were it to result in a 100% take-up rate, a rate which seems highly unlikely. Those same opponents regularly, and often rightly, cry out for more funding for education. The reality is the funding considered in the Backpack Bill would go directly to students. Also, let's be clear: HB 11 will absolutely lead to an increase in state spending for education. However, funding Ohio's education system is a constitutionally required, essential function of government, and it should be prioritized over, dare I say, a great many non-essential services and projects the state spends billions of dollars on in Budget after Budget.

Last month, I also testified in support of another proposal before the General Assembly, SB 11, which would create universal eligibility for the existing EdChoice Program. I have been asked in recent weeks how AFP can be supportive of all three concepts: the governor's budget proposal (expand EdChoice eligibility to 400% of FPL) the Backpack Bill (universal ESAs), and SB 11 (universal EdChoice eligibility). My answer has been *all* of these proposals align with AFP's vision for creating a freer education system that affords students and families a fighting chance to succeed and learn in whatever environment best suits their unique needs. I recognize that many hard choices must be made as the General Assembly hammers out the details of HB 33, but AFP believes that a robust, competitive education system is one of the essential constitutionally required functions of government, and therefore should take priority over the millions and billions of dollars of debatable expenditures that only benefit select groups, industries, or individuals. Whatever the art of the possible is for improving Ohio's school choice environment, this General Assembly should seize the moment and follow the lead of other states taking bold steps and put Ohio parents and families first; their futures depend on it, as

does the collective future of our state if we want to continue to be a place where people can prosper and realize their full potential.

Thank you again, Madam Chair, for the opportunity to provide testimony, and I would like to publicly thank all legislators who have been outspoken advocates of the policies mentioned previously. AFP is hopeful for positive outcomes as HB 33 makes its way through the legislative process, and I'm happy to do my best to answer any questions the subcommittee might have at this time.

Americans for Prosperity (AFP) exists to recruit, educate, and mobilize citizens in support of the policies and goals of a free society at the local, state, and federal level, helping every American live their dream – especially the least fortunate. AFP has more millions of activists across the nation, a local infrastructure that includes 36 state chapters, and has received financial support from more than 100,000 Americans in all 50 states. For more information, visit www.AmericansForProsperity.org.