

87th House District
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Sponsor Testimony – HB 11

Chairman Bird, Vice-Chair Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Lightbody and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to present House Bill 11 to you today. House Bill 11 will create the Backpack Scholarship Program, an education funding model that allows state education dollars to focus on the most important aspect in education, **the student**. Education cannot be a one-size fits all model and outcomes are best when parents are engaged and involved.

This program is designed to acknowledge the unique abilities and needs of Ohio's student population and to foster an educational environment in which every student can have access to the best learning environment for them.

You, as committee members on this important committee, are no doubt committed to improving outcomes for Ohio students. The fact is that the state of education in Ohio today needs change. We have large disparities between districts in both spending and outcomes, high remediation rates for post-secondary students, surging chronic-absenteeism, cries from job creators on a capable workforce, and tension between parents and districts over curriculum. The status quo is not acceptable, parents across the state are demanding better. The status quo, like so many other areas of government has created a giant bureaucratic system that has many competing interests in addition to the original mandate of student outcomes.

We are here to propose a solution too many of those problems that we face today. And as we hopefully will be able to hold future hearings on this bill, I will ask you to keep one thing in mind while listening to the testimony of various proponents, opponents, and interested parties:

**Is the focus on the student,
or on the broader system of education bureaucracy?**

The solution we propose is that of the Backpack Scholarship Program. It would create an opt-in Education Savings Account (ESA) program that is eligible to all students regardless of their zip code or economic status. It would put the student first in the education funding process. The local public school will continue to be the primary option in education, but if that is not the best learning environment for a student, they would have access to a Backpack Scholarship to pursue other opportunities. For most Ohio students, the best environment will likely continue to be the local public school and the benefit of this model is that under that circumstance, nothing will change. But for those students who need an alternative, there will now be new opportunities.

¹ <https://fordhaminstitute.org/ohio/research/ohio-edchoice-programs-impact-school-district-enrollments-finances-and-academics>

If a student opts-in to the program, the state share of education dollars would follow the student in the form of a student-specific ESA managed by the Treasurer of State. Proper fund usage will be monitored by the Treasurer to ensure that funds are used for allowed purposes.

Allowed use of ESA funds:

1. Tuition and fees at a participating nonpublic school;
2. Tuition and fees for a nonpublic online learning program;
3. Tutoring or intervention services by an individual or educational facility, provided those services are not provided by an immediate family member;
4. Fees for nationally standardized assessments, Advanced Placement (AP) exams, and any exams related to college or university admission, as well as tuition or fees for preparatory courses for those exams;
5. Tuition and fees for programs of study or course curriculum that led to an industry recognized credential that satisfies a workforce need;
6. Educational services, including occupational, behavioral, physical, speech-language, and audiology therapies;
7. Curriculum, textbooks, instructional materials, and supplies; and
8. Fees for after-school and summer education programs.

The bill establishes two routes for fund disbursement: 1) through direct payment to pre-approved vendors that are vetted by the program and 2) through a parent reimbursement process that requires documentation review.

The yearly disbursement amounts for the program match the EdChoice dollars at \$5,500 for K-8 students and \$7,500 for 9-12 students. This is a yearly program that allows for a 50% rollover for remaining funds in the ESA from year to year as well as a 50% rollover to a qualified 529 plan after 12th grade completion.

Parents have always had the legal right to choose their child's school. Their options, however, have been limited to either moving the family to a school district of their choosing or to self-finance alternate education. More recently, Ohio has made strides with the EdChoice Scholarship to provide new opportunities for financially challenged families as well as students in "failing" districts. As it stands today, if you are a wealthy Ohioan and can afford to pay out of pocket for your child's education OR you are financially challenged and eligible for an Ed-Choice scholarship, you have educational options. But, for most Ohioans who fall somewhere in between those two ends of the bell curve, the only option for your child's education is determined by your home address.

As mentioned earlier, parental involvement is one of the most important aspects of a child's education, regardless of learning environment. This is true for many Ohioans who outsource their responsibility to the local school district because they have no alternative. At its most basic level, the availability of a Backpack Scholarship will promote more parental involvement by simply providing the opportunity to make educational decisions for their child.

RealClear Opinion Research released a survey in April of 2020 and again in June of 2022 (April 2020 -> June 2022) showing the positive trend for this issue nationwide among all political identifiers. Here are the results:

¹ <https://fordhaminstitute.org/ohio/research/ohio-edchoice-programs-impact-school-district-enrollments-finances-and-academics>

Question: “School choice gives parents the right to use the tax dollars designated for their child’s education to send their child to the public or private school which best serves their needs. Generally speaking, would you say you support or oppose the concept of school choice?”

- Overall support: 64% -> 72% (+8 pp)
- Democratic support: 59% -> 68% (+9 pp)
- Republican support: 75% -> 82% (+7 pp)
- Independent support: 60% -> 67% (+7 pp)

It is clear that parents of all political ideologies see the positives in this direction and support is continuing to increase.

Choice and competition go hand in hand. Without competition, we get a monopoly that lacks the incentive to be responsive. Many studies have been performed on the impact of school choice programs around the country from various researchers. Local to Ohio, Stéphane Lavertu of The Ohio State University released data in December 2022 in studying Ohio’s EdChoice program from inception to the year before the pandemic. Here is what the study concluded¹:

- Improved district achievement
- Reduced district segregation
- No impact on district expenditures per pupil

The claims that choice has negative impacts on education has been found to be false time and time again.

Ohio has long been a leader in allowing student choice in education; from the creation of the Cleveland Scholarship in 1996, to public charter schools in 1997, the Autism Scholarship in 2003, EdChoice Scholarship in 2005, and the Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship in 2012. We even created the Ohio Afterschool Child Enrichment Program (ACE) in the last budget setting up a \$500 ESA for eligible students. Enrollment in these programs has increased and expanded over time to allow more students to find educational opportunities that suit their unique needs.

But times are changing quickly, and Ohio is being passed by other states enacting universal choice ESA programs. West Virginia did so in 2021, Arizona in 2022, and both Iowa and Utah have recently passed similar programs already in 2023. The governors of Texas and Arkansas have both pushed for ESA models in their states along with many more.

Let’s continue with bold leadership in Ohio and put our students first not only in words, but in opportunity. Allowing every student to find the best educational path to prepare them for a bright future hopefully right here in Ohio.

Thank you for your time and I will now pass to my joint sponsor, Rep. John.



¹ <https://fordhaminstitute.org/ohio/research/ohio-edchoice-programs-impact-school-district-enrollments-finances-and-academics>