



HOUSE PRIMARY & SECONDARY EDUCATION COMMITTEE – Proponent
Testimony, HB 11, March 14th, 2023

Chairman Bird, Vice Chair Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the committee, 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. Accordingly, I am here to express AFP’s strong support for House Bill 11, The Backpack Bill, which if passed would create universal educational savings accounts (ESAs) and place Ohio on the same successful trajectory as several states around the country, including some regional neighbors, regarding greater choice and increased options for parents and students seeking the educational approach best suited to meet their unique needs.

If you were to leave the Statehouse this evening and travel a mere two and half hours south down U.S. Route 23 to Huntington, WV, you would discover that the universal ESA approach to education the Backpack Bill seeks to create is already in effect in the form of the [Hope Scholarship](#). Other states such as Arizona, Iowa, Utah, and most recently Arkansas have already passed similar legislation in the past several months, and others, such as Florida, are on the cusp of doing so with bipartisan support. Other states are innovating their education systems to fund students instead of systems, and Ohio would do well to keep pace.

HB 11 is the next logical step in Ohio’s arc toward creating a school choice climate on par with the aforementioned states and continuing to compete with them to remain an attractive home base for businesses and families. Our state has a tradition of innovating in this policy space and has demonstrated success through initiatives like the Cleveland and John Peterson Scholarship programs. 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 preparing 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.

HB 11 will also help solve another major issue, which I like to refer to as Ohio's "patchwork quilt" approach to the delivery of education services and school choice. Ohio already has many quality education delivery systems available – public schools, private schools, charter schools, online learning, and home schooling. Ohio also already has an abundance of school choice options – EdChoice, EdChoice expansion, the Cleveland Scholarship Program, and in some districts, open enrollment. The Backpack Bill will solve this problem of the "patchwork quilt" by having one universal eligibility program for choice so that all parents who live in or move to Ohio will know that they are empowered to direct their students' funding to a school or learning opportunity best aligned to their unique needs.

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 will 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.

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. HB 11 would be a major stride toward achieving this vision, and AFP hopes this committee gives the issue of universal ESAs its due consideration over the coming weeks.

Thank you again, Chairman Bird, for the opportunity to provide testimony, and I would like to publicly thank Representatives McClain and John for their bold and tireless leadership in striving to create an education system that has greater potential to meet the needs of all students, families, employers, and communities. AFP strongly supports the Backpack Bill, and I'm happy to do my best to answer any questions the committee 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.