



THE BUCKEYE INSTITUTE

Expanding School Choice Puts Students First

Interested Party Testimony
Ohio House Finance Subcommittee on
Primary and Secondary Education
Ohio House Bill 33

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Thank you, Chair Richardson, Ranking Member Isaacsohn and members of the Committee, for the opportunity to testify on the education policies in Ohio House Bill 33.

My name is Greg R. Lawson, I am a research fellow at **The Buckeye Institute**, an independent research and educational institution—a think tank—whose mission is to advance free-market public policy in the states.

Every public policy decision regarding K-12 education in Ohio should aim to overcome a **historic decline** in academic performance following the COVID school closures.

Analyzing state test data provided by the Ohio Department of Education, Ohio State University researchers **determined** that between March 2020 (when schools began closing due to the pandemic) through April 2021, K-12 students lost between one-half and one full year of equivalent learning in math, and between one-third and one-half of a year of learning in English language arts (ELA). Minority and low-income students saw even larger declines of between one and a half and two times greater—a worrisome extension of a stubborn achievement gap.

The OSU **study** further found that students already performing below grade level prior to the shutdown lost more than those performing at or above grade level. Hybrid instruction that included limited in-classroom instruction as well as remote instruction led to a 10 percent reduction of ELA performance relative to the norm. And students who remained in fully remote learning environments suffered nearly three times the learning loss of those who maintained in-person instruction.

To address this historic learning loss, Ohio should pursue policies that enable families to provide the best education for their children. By increasing schooling options and educational resources, policymakers will help families tailor academic environments to fit their children’s learning needs. One student in a household may thrive in their local public school, while their sibling struggles and would do better in a charter or private school across town. Students and their families deserve options.

EdChoice and charter schools form the core of Ohio’s school choice options. And it is encouraging that Governor Mike DeWine has **proposed** expanding EdChoice eligibility to families earning up to 400 percent of the federal poverty line and sending additional resources to high-performing charter schools. These are bold ideas, but they can and should be even bolder.

First, Ohio should be funding students first through innovative policies like education savings accounts, or ESAs. ESAs provide **flexibility** for families to pay for educational products and services tailored to their child’s academic needs. They build upon the successes of voucher programs like EdChoice by paying for more than just tuition. **Arizona, Iowa, and Utah** have recently passed universal ESA bills that would allow any student that wants an ESA to have one.

Second, **Ohio Senate Bill 11**, pending in the Senate, would also expand school choice for parents and students by making all students eligible for the EdChoice voucher, and by raising the tax credit for home schooling families. Voucher programs like EdChoice have proven successful

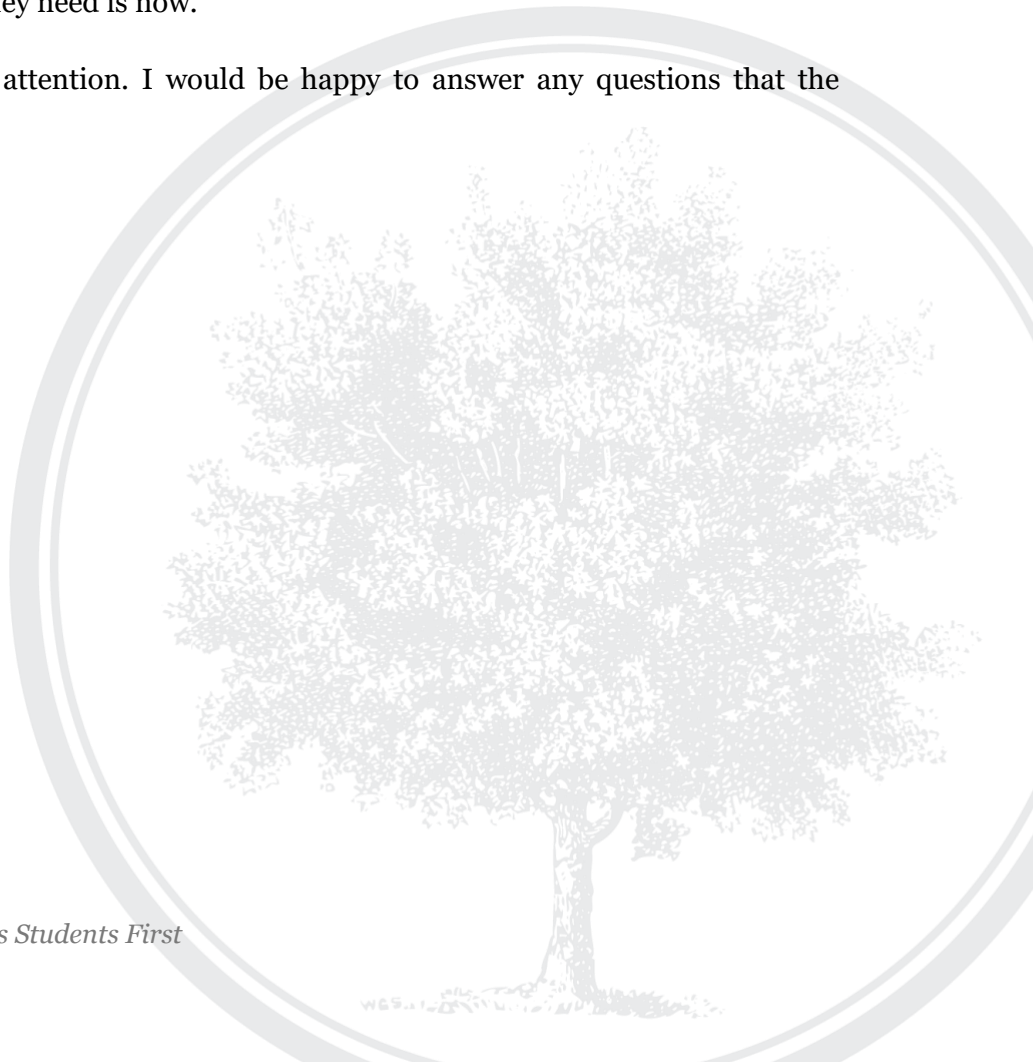
across the country and that success merits further expansion. A **meta-analysis of rigorous studies** by the University of Arkansas, for example, shows positive gains on testing for voucher recipients. Other **studies** have shown increased parental satisfaction and higher graduation rates and college attendance among voucher students.

Third, the DeWine Administration's proposed \$3,000 funding increase for disadvantaged students in high performing charter schools deserves praise, but more funding for more charter schools is still needed. Charter schools receive far fewer dollars than traditional district schools because they receive no local tax dollars. Charter schools *are* public schools and they—especially the successful ones—deserve greater parity and financial support.

Finally, Ohio should fix its inter-district **open enrollment policy**, which affects the state's largest school choice program with roughly 80 percent of the public school districts and nearly 80,000 students. Unfortunately, most **nonparticipating districts** are suburban districts near major urban centers. Their nonparticipation limits opportunities for students in urban, under-performing schools, making it harder to address pandemic-related learning loss and close academic achievement gaps. Policymakers should make it easier for *all* families to send students to their school of choice by requiring *all* Ohio public schools to participate in inter-district open enrollment with only limited exceptions.

House Bill 33 will help families that desperately need additional educational choices and resources. But the General Assembly can and should be bolder. The time to put students first and give them the academic tools they need is now.

Thank you for your time and attention. I would be happy to answer any questions that the Committee might have.



About The Buckeye Institute

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