



Proponent Testimony on Senate Bill 11 Senate Education Committee

Thank you, Chair Brenner, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram, and Senate Education Committee members for giving me the opportunity to provide testimony today on Senate Bill 11.

My name is Chad Aldis, and I am the Vice President for Ohio Policy at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. The Fordham Institute is an education-focused nonprofit that conducts research, analysis, and policy advocacy with offices in Columbus, Dayton, and Washington, D.C.

I am here today to testify in support of Senate Bill 11. This legislation would move Ohio to a universal private-school choice program by removing the income limits for the EdChoice scholarship. Currently, only households with incomes below 250 percent of the federal poverty level—\$75,000 for a family of four—are eligible for income-based EdChoice. Last year, more than 20,000 students participated in the income-based program, while another 35,000 used the state's performance-based scholarship. The latter program, along with the Cleveland program, would be unnecessary under this bill. Instead, all Ohio families would be eligible for scholarships under a single, consolidated EdChoice program.

The current design of EdChoice rightly provides our neediest children with access to private schools. This is absolutely necessary as we strive to ensure that every student has high quality educational opportunities. The Governor's recent proposal to expand EdChoice eligibility to 400 percent of the poverty level would be another big step in the right direction. His plan would allow more working-class families to access private schools of their choice. Senate Bill 11 would go one step further, empowering *all families* to choose the schools that work best for their children.

My testimony today will not focus on private school scholarships generally; Ohio has two decades of experience with the various public policy issues they raise. If you have questions on those issues, I'll happily address them when my testimony concludes. My focus instead will be on why SB 11 is correct to move toward universal eligibility.

Fundamentally, parent empowerment is why we stand in support of this legislation. Families are the unit most responsible for the upbringing and education of their children. This basic idea was affirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1925 landmark *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* decision where the court wrote: "Those who nurture him [the child] and direct his destiny have the right, coupled with the high duty, to recognize and prepare him for additional obligations."

When states expand schooling options, they strengthen these parental rights. While many parents are satisfied with their local public schools, others prefer something different for their child. Some have children with special academic or artistic talents, and may seek private schools that can better nurture those gifts. Other parents might value the individual attention and more family like settings offered by many private schools. Still others seek particular private schools because of their faith-based focus.

Ohio has taken great strides to unlock private school opportunities, but they are still a stretch for many parents. Households with two parents working in middle-income jobs, such as a police officer and a nurse, are likely ineligible for any financial assistance. They'll either need to make hard family budget decisions or settle for their second or third choice in schools. Universal eligibility however would give every family the means to choose the school that works best for them.

It's not only parent empowerment that leads us to support universal choice. It will also promote healthy competition between all types of schools as they seek to provide the best education possible to their students. Private schools have long had to be highly responsive to parent concerns and student needs because they automatically lose funding when families are dissatisfied. In this way, private schools face strong "market-driven" accountability. But with more options becoming available, public schools are also incentivized to pay closer attention to their students' needs. Research conducted by Fordham in Ohio, as well as from other locations, finds that private school scholarship programs help to improve public schools through competition.¹

We also believe that universal choice would be fairer to all taxpaying parents. As Ohio taxpayers know all too well, the state and local districts levy significant taxes to support education. Private school parents pay their fair share as well, even though they receive educational benefits that are nowhere near what they pay in taxes. These families have to "double pay" for education—once through taxes and again through tuition. That's unfair to parents who simply want a different educational experience for their children.

Finally, there are some practical reasons to support universal eligibility. As an administrative matter, removing income requirements would reduce the bureaucracy needed to "means-test" the benefit. Parents would only need to prove they are Ohio residents and have school aged children. Second, a universal program would remove any type of stigma that might be associated with an income-based model. Proponents of universal free school lunch have argued that such a move would eliminate concerns about stigma. The same thing would happen if children from all backgrounds become eligible for private school scholarships. Third, as noted above, Senate Bill 11 would allow for the elimination of Ohio's performance-based scholarship, a program model that has upset public schools and creates some uncertainty for parents. The state would no longer need to create a list of "failing" schools, and families would no longer have any question about their eligibility.

Around the nation, momentum is building to make private school choice universal. Arizona, Iowa, Utah, and West Virginia have already made universal choice a reality for families in their states. Other states such as Florida and Oklahoma are seriously considering a move in this direction as well. Senate Bill 11 would ensure that Ohio keeps pace as a longstanding national leader in private school choice. But most importantly, it would help to ensure all families have access to the learning environment—including private schools—that best meets each student's unique learning needs.

¹ <https://fordhaminstitute.org/ohio/research/ohio-edchoice-programs-impact-school-district-enrollments-finances-and-academics> and <https://www.educationnext.org/ripple-effect-how-private-school-choice-programs-boost-competition-benefit-public-school-students/>.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I am happy to answer any questions that you may have.