



VIEWPOINT

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Educational Opportunity in Times of Political Change

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Summary

The Special Education Scholarship Program proposed in H.B. 431 is an excellent opportunity for Ohio policy makers to return to core principles. The program would empower parents to decide what type of school best fits their child's individual needs.

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With the election of Gov. Ted Strickland some people might think it's time to put the brakes on school choice. They'd be wrong based on what we've seen elsewhere.

Arizona passed more new or expanded school choice programs in 2006 under Democratic Governor Janet Napolitano than under any Republican governor in the state's history: two K-12 scholarship programs and a corporate tuition tax credit scholarship program, as well as a higher education scholarship program. In addition to adopting the country's first-ever foster care scholarship program, Arizona's new K-12 programs will benefit special needs children and children from low-income families statewide.

Arizona has long been considered the national leader in education freedom, but Ohio is arguably the strongest challenger. The landmark Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program has inspired numerous scholarship programs across the country since its inception a decade ago. Likewise, the recently-expanded Autism Scholarship Program, the Educational Choice Scholarship Program for students in chronically failing schools, and the proposed statewide Special Needs Scholarship Program are model reforms that legislators in Arizona and other states are attempting to replicate.



Parents should be empowered to meet the unique needs of their unique children.

The Buckeye State shouldn't change course just because it changed governors. Like Arizona Gov. Napolitano, Democratic Governors Tom Vilsack of Iowa, Ed Rendell of Pennsylvania, and Jim Doyle of Wisconsin all signed bills into law expanding school choice in 2006.

To be sure, Gov. Napolitano and her fellow Democratic governors are hardly school choice converts. Napolitano, for example, promised to sign the corporate tuition tax credit legislation then broke her word repeatedly by vetoing it three times in two years. She finally relented because of intense pressure from Republican legislators, enabling a more expansive version of the program to pass as part of the state budget adopted last summer, along with the two additional K-12 scholarship programs.

Governors Napolitano, Rendell, and Doyle all handily won re-election. Iowa Gov. Tom Vilsack honored his term limit pledge and is planning a presidential run. In contrast, Republicans paid a steep price for their timidity in advancing core policies like school choice that matter most to their base. Just ask middle class parents. Some will tell you it's getting harder to find rigorous public schools in their neighborhoods. Others will tell you they're struggling to pay out-of-pocket private school tuition on top of taxes for public schools that don't work for their children.

School choice is shaping up to be the Welfare Reform of our decade, and elected officials should take note.

The Special Education Scholarship Program proposed in H.B. 431 is an excellent opportunity for Ohio policymakers to return to core principles. It empowers parents to decide which school, public or private, offers the best quality program based upon their children's unique individual needs. Schools must meet clear outcomes defined by their children's individualized education programs, but they have the flexibility to innovate so all students can reach their full potential. If parents are dissatisfied with their children's academic progress, they can take them—and their scholarship dollars—elsewhere.

Research also shows this kind of student-centered, results-driven approach works. In their evaluation of Florida's McKay Scholarship Program for Students with Disabilities, Manhattan Institute researchers found 9 out of 10 scholarship parents reported their child's school provided all the required services compared to only 3 out of 10 public school parents.

Ultimately, school choice should be a matter of right and wrong, not right versus left. A commonsense standard of fundamental fairness demands that all students have an equal opportunity to attend the schools their parents think are best for them.

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(David Hansen is President of the Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions, a research and education institute in Columbus, Ohio. Dr. Vicki Murray, Ph.D., is a Buckeye Institute Visiting Scholar. More information is available at www.buckeyeinstitute.org. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided the author and his affiliation are cited.

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