



VIEWPOINT

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EdChoice Voucher Participation

By: Matthew Carr

Summary

With the application deadline for Ohio's newest voucher program fast approaching, 561 students have signed up. Compared to other voucher programs' initial participation rates, the numbers are encouraging. But there is also still a lot of work to be done to get more students enrolled in the coming years.

Main text word count: 560

With the application deadline fast approaching, 561 students, 1.2% of those eligible, have signed up for the new statewide EdChoice school voucher program.

Despite this slow start, there is good reason to believe that this voucher program can fulfill its promise of offering true education choice to those who need it most. When these early participation numbers are placed in the context of other successful voucher programs around the country it becomes clear that EdChoice is setting off on a path that is remarkably similar.

The first year participation rates for some of the largest and best-known voucher programs around the country provide some context.

In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the first year of their voucher program had 341 participants, which was 0.7% of all eligible students. Now, there are 15,035 participants, 20.5% of all eligible students.

In Florida, the McKay voucher program for special education students, currently the largest voucher program in the country, had 977 participants in its first year of existence, a utilization rate of 0.3% of all eligible students. Today, the program serves 15,910 students, 4.3% of all eligible students.

The new voucher program in our nation's capital, which just finished its first year, had 1,015 participants, which amounted to 1.7% of those eligible to participate in the program.

With state education officials expecting a rush of last minute applications, it appears likely that the Ohio EdChoice program will have a larger percentage of eligible students participating in its first year than any of these programs. And the experience from other voucher programs tells us that these numbers will likely grow in the coming years.

Comparing the Participation Rates for Eligible Students in Voucher Programs

Voucher Program	1 st Year Participation	Current Participation
Milwaukee	0.7%	20.5%
McKay	0.3%	4.3%
Washington DC	1.7%	**
Cleveland	7.3%	8.1%
EdChoice	1.2%*	**

* The application deadline is June 9, 2006.

**New Program

Source: The Friedman Foundation

But there are several barriers to participation that have come to light in the course of implementing EdChoice that need to be addressed before the next application season if such growth is going to be realized.

The Cleveland voucher program offers guidance on what aspects of implementation work well, and those that hinder participation. The Cleveland program has had a consistent participation rate of between 7.5% and 8% during its first eight years.

The relatively high initial rate was achieved because of the fact that every parent in the Cleveland Municipal district could apply, provided their income was below a certain level. With EdChoice the rules of eligibility, based on school buildings rather than districts, have created a confusing and gerrymandered voucher program. It is not a parent-friendly program.

Yet the Cleveland program has not seen the same amount of growth as many other similar programs. This is due in part to the fact that the application process is cumbersome and must be done through a government office, rather than through a private school. Another factor has been the uncertainty of the eligibility that was created by the grade-level restrictions that were imposed by the legislature.

From these experiences we have learned that participation growth is tightly connected to stability in eligibility rules. The EdChoice program should be opened to as many students as possible, and based on clear and simple criteria. If parents do not know that there are vouchers available, and face a complex application process, participation rates are not likely to grow.

When comparing EdChoice to other voucher programs' initial participation rates, the numbers are encouraging. But there is still a lot of work to be done to help parents know they have a choice and how to use it.

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Dorothea Prouty
88 East Broad Street, Suite 1120
Columbus, Ohio 43215

Phone: (614) 224-4422
Fax: (614) 224-4644

www.buckeyeinstitute.org
prouty@buckeyeinstitute.org

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(Matthew Carr is the Education Policy Director for the Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions, a research and educational institute located in Columbus, Ohio. More information on educational issues 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.)

