



# VIEWPOINT

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## New EdChoice Voucher Program a Success

By: Matthew Carr

### Summary

There are 2,568 students that have applied for the EdChoice voucher program, 5.5% of all eligible students. When these numbers are placed in the context of first year enrollment rates for other voucher programs around the country it becomes clear that this first year of the Ohio EdChoice program has been an unqualified success.

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When the deadline for submitting applications passed on Friday night, there were about 2,568 students who had applied for the EdChoice voucher program, 5.5% of all eligible students.

This first year of the Ohio EdChoice program has been an unqualified success.

During the last few weeks, newspapers across the state have been writing up the enrollment tally as “only” or “just” so many takers of the 14,000 vouchers made available by this program. The use of such pejoratives is both misleading and inappropriate.

That’s because the initial utilization rate for the EdChoice program is higher than what was accomplished in the inaugural years of the Milwaukee voucher program (0.7%), the Washington DC voucher program (1.7%), and the Florida McKay voucher program for special education students, now the largest in the country (0.3%).

### Comparing the Participation Rates for Eligible Students in Voucher Programs

Voucher Program	1 <sup>st</sup> Year Participation	Current Participation
Milwaukee	0.7%	20.5%
McKay	0.3%	4.3%
Washington DC	1.7%	**
Cleveland	7.3%	8.1%
EdChoice	5.5%	**

\*\*New Program

Source: The Friedman Foundation and ODE data

While the initial enrollment rate in the Cleveland program was higher (7.3%), this program also had the advantage of being a seminal shift in education policy at the time. No doubt, the instant national notoriety of the program helped to propel its initial enrollment numbers.

The naysayers who have been touting the enrollment numbers as evidence of the veracity of their opposition to this voucher program have failed to consider the context.

Voucher programs typically get off to a slow start for several reasons. The biggest obstacle to recruitment is the sheer newness of the program. Parents have to know that the program exists in order to apply.

This requires a massive public information campaign in the first year. In future years, word of the program will spread and numbers will rise as a result.

The slow start typically seen in new voucher programs is also the result of semantics. These programs tend to have official titles like “The Ohio Education Choice Scholarship Program.” Parents often do not realize that a ‘scholarship’ is simply a euphemism for a ‘voucher.’

And the difference matters; a scholarship tends to pay for part of your tuition and is not guaranteed to be there next year, or the year after. A voucher, on the other hand, does tend to pay for the entire tuition amount, and is guaranteed to be available over the course of the child’s education. Provided, of course, the state doesn’t renege on their promises.

Finally, enrollment was hindered in this first year of the EdChoice program by the fact that the eligibility rules made it difficult for parents to know whether or not they could even apply for a voucher or not.

The difference between being eligible to get your child out of their chronically failing school and being forced to continue sending your child to a chronically failing school could be as capricious as living on one block or the next one over.

Notwithstanding these obstacles, the first year of the Ohio EdChoice program has clearly been a success. To have a higher percentage of the eligible children enrolled than many of the other major voucher programs across the country did in their inaugural years is a testament to the desire of parents to get their children out of dysfunction traditional public schools.

It is also a testament to the hard work of dedicated people at the Ohio Department of Education and the many non-profit organizations that worked tirelessly to get the word out and get parents signed up.

However, much like the first round of a playoff series in a professional sports season, the first win is always tempered by the knowledge that very soon they are going to have to start preparing, and making adjustments, for the second round.

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### **Attention Editors and Producers**

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