



# THE BUCKEYE INSTITUTE

## **Ohio Needs a Holistic Approach to Education Reform**

Interested Party Testimony  
Ohio House and Ohio Senate Conference Committee  
House Bill 9

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As Prepared for Delivery

Thank you, Chairman Jones and members of the Committee, for the opportunity to testify regarding House Bill 9.

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.

Ohio's EdChoice program needs short-term and long-term reforms. Originally designed to help students attending under-performing public schools, the number of schools placed on the EdChoice eligible list has risen recently, raising concerns that public school districts will be adversely affected.

In the short-term, proposed solutions to the EdChoice problem must be sensitive, of course, to specific challenges presented by the current voucher model that relies on report card outcomes. One of those challenges concerns students already participating in the program. Any short-term solutions that would scale back or eliminate EdChoice should include protections for students currently benefiting from EdChoice to ensure that they do not suffer the consequences of near-term reforms. Second, any short-term solution should be used as stepping stone toward a long-term solution that will revamp Ohio's school funding system through education pluralism by allowing public education money to follow students to their chosen education provider.

A near-term transition from the current failing-school model to an income-based model would take a step in the right school-choice direction, and, in fact, **most school choice programs** around the nation operate that way. But such a transition must still ensure that children currently participating in the EdChoice program will continue to enjoy the benefits of and opportunities provided by EdChoice. Whatever shortcomings or problems the current program may have created the children are not to blame.

In the long-term, EdChoice reforms must move Ohio toward a holistic approach to education reform rooted in **education pluralism**. An education pluralist system funds education at the state level but allows schools at the local level to tailor education to meet the needs of their students. In such a system, schools may be traditional district public schools, charter schools, or participating private schools. Parents may choose from a menu of high-quality educational options for their children, and funds for the chosen education follow the student to the selected school. Rather than focusing on a school's under-performance or a family's gross income, education pluralism focuses on allowing parents to find the right school for teaching their children.

Because Ohio's current school funding system pays public school districts first, some mistakenly perceive any money that leaves a district through **open enrollment**, choosing **charter schools**, or **scholarship vouchers** as taking money away from education, even though the children in question are still being educated. Ohio's school funding formula complicates the matter by relying primarily on local property taxes to fund local schools. This formula yields some absurd situations in which some districts **receive funding** for students they no longer educate—and may not have educated for years—while other districts are **not fully funded** for their current

enrollment. Thus, the current system in some respects actually divorces school-choice from school-funding, which leads to untenable funding, unnecessary rancor, and lower quality outcomes for students.

Education pluralism recognizes that school-choice and school-funding are inextricably intertwined. Embracing a funding approach that allows public dollars to follow the student instead of the school, education pluralism takes a holistic approach to education reform and resolves the current funding conflict.

Representatives Cupp and Patterson have worked to move Ohio in this direction with a revised school funding formula. Much more work remains, but they have laid a cornerstone for Ohio to build upon. Significant reforms like these take time—it took Alberta, Canada **two decades** to incrementally reach a pluralistic school system—but Ohio can and should begin building on the Cupp-Patterson foundation immediately.

First and foremost, Ohio should revise school funding to ensure that the money follows the students to whichever school meets their educational needs. Ohio would not be first state to adopt this approach, and some states do **better** at this than others. Recent reforms, for example, in **California** and **Kentucky** lean toward allowing state dollars to follow their students, but they need better formulas so that their school districts can more **accurately** budget and plan for the academic year. Ohio can learn from and improve upon their efforts.

Second, every public school district in Ohio should participate in universal open enrollment so that students may attend schools outside their government-assigned school district. Over three-quarters of districts already **allow** students from other districts to apply to and attend their schools, many of our big-city districts do not. The hard fact remains that zip code-based education does not work. It is time to give parents choices for their children.

Education pluralism is not a novel concept, many **democratic countries** have been implementing the system for the past **two decades**, and have seen **better test scores** and **higher graduation rates** as a result. Despite what some critics may say, educational pluralism would not endorse any particular type of school or education. It would satisfy Ohio's constitutional **requirements** that the state provide a “thorough and efficient system of common schools” held to the same academic standards, and it would align with U.S. Supreme Court **decisions** that have already blessed allowing public funds to follow students to the schools of their choice.

Education pluralism offers Ohio a holistic approach to a brighter educational future for our students. It is time to take decisive, short-term and long-term steps in that direction.

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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