

BUCKEYE POLICY BRIEF



SCHOOL CHOICE NOW ACT: MEETING STUDENTS' NEEDS IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

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Introduction

Across the country, the 2020 school year promises to start like no other in living memory. The COVID-19 pandemic has left parents, teachers, and administrators struggling to identify safe and effective learning environments for K-12 students. Many schools have elected not to resume full-time in-person classes, with some opting for a hybrid of in-person/remote learning, and others moving to distance-learning platforms entirely. Hybrid and distance-learning environments may not be best suited to millions of primary and secondary students, and now more than ever families need educational choices.

School choice initiatives provide academic options and resources for parents and students. Popular school choice programs include private school vouchers, tax credit scholarships, education savings accounts, and public charter schools. Such programs are even more critical today as a majority of urban school districts plan to open without classrooms and students who do not thrive in online environments risk falling behind academically.

Senators Tim Scott (R-SC) and Lamar Alexander (R-TN) have proposed including the School Choice Now Act in future pandemic relief legislation.¹ The act would provide significant emergency funding for families and private schools beginning a difficult and uncertain school year, and it would lay a foundation for building more expansive school choice initiatives at the state and federal levels in the future.

¹ **Scott and Alexander Introduce the School Choice Now Act**, Office of U.S. Senator Lamar Alexander press release, July 22, 2020.

How School Choice Helps

“School choice” offers parents and students a broad range of educational alternatives to attending traditional, K-12 public schools, including private school vouchers, tax credit scholarships,² education savings accounts,³ and public charter schools. Under most school choice initiatives, parents can spend a portion of their own tax dollars at an alternative non-public school or on other educational resources that help meet the needs of their child.

Families need such options and alternatives to traditional public schools now more than ever in light of the disruption and uncertainty in education this year brought on by COVID-19. A survey of 477 public school districts across the country suggests that only 51 percent currently plan to start the school year with all or some in-person learning.⁴ That means that nearly half of all the surveyed districts intend to conduct classes remotely. More than 50 percent of urban school districts plan no in-person teaching, compared to only four percent of rural school districts.⁵ In Ohio, approximately 325 of the 611 school districts (or just over half) representing 38 percent of public school students plan to return to five-day, in-person school weeks, with 55 of the urban and surrounding suburban districts starting entirely with remote learning, and 154 planning a hybrid combination of remote and in-person environment.⁶ How distance learning and hybrid environments affect learning and other social skills remains largely unknown, and many families may prefer the traditional academic model of in-person learning only to have that option unavailable in their public school district.

With so many of Ohio’s urban school districts shifting to distance-learning to start the year, many African American and Hispanic students concentrated in urban school districts may be forced to attend classes online regardless of their family situations, learning needs, or preferences. Unfortunately, without available educational alternatives, mandatory distance-learning threatens to expand the substantial and stubborn education gaps in reading and math for African American and Hispanic students. According to the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress, administered by the U.S. Department of Education, the eighth grade gap for African American students compared to white students is 28 points.⁷ In math, the gap is 32 points.⁸ And those gaps

² [What is a Tax-Credit Scholarship?](#), EdChoice.org (Last visited August 19, 2020).

³ [What is an Education Savings Account?](#), EdChoice.org (Last visited August 19, 2020).

⁴ Bethany Gross, Alicia Opalka, Padma Gundapaneni, [School Districts Across the Nation Plan for an Uncertain Year Ahead](#), The Center for Reinventing Public Education, August, 2020.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Emily Bamforth, [About 38 Percent of Ohio Traditional Public School Students are Going to School Full-Time In Person](#), Cleveland.com, August 11, 2020.

⁷ [National Student Group Scores and Student Score Gaps- 8th Grade Reading](#), NationsReportCard.gov (Last visited August 19, 2020).

⁸ [National Student Group Scores and Student Score Gaps- 8th Grade Mathematics](#), NationsReportCard.gov (Last visited August 19, 2020).

are 20 and 24 points respectively for Hispanic students.⁹ Such gaps risk becoming educational chasms that will negatively affect lifetime earnings.¹⁰

School choice may help close these gaps, particularly for urban students, by offering parents access to funding to tailor their child's education to suit their child's academic needs. Take education savings accounts—or ESAs—for example. The most versatile and effective school choice vehicle, they combine many of the advantages of school vouchers and tax credit scholarships to provide critical help to families and their students struggling to adapt to the shifting educational landscape.¹¹ A family with three children may find that the traditional public school is right for their eldest child, but their middle child requires extra tutoring, and the unique curriculum of a nearby private school would be best for their youngest. An ESA for each child would allow the family to direct their education spending and put their children in the best education setting for them, not their siblings.

Private school voucher programs, tax credit scholarships, and public charter schools are other school choice initiatives that give families a way out of the one-size-fits-all public school district approach to learning. Those options, initiatives, and access to resources may prove essential for families coping with the uncertainty and disruption of education during a persistent pandemic.

How the School Choice Now Act Helps

The School Choice Now Act, sponsored by senators Tim Scott (R-SC) and Lamar Alexander (R-TN), may be included in a new COVID-19 relief package being considered in Congress. If added, the legislation would extend federal funding to families and private schools nationwide—offering school choice options to millions of K-12 students.

First, the act would provide one-time emergency appropriations (10 percent of COVID-19 emergency education funding) to “scholarship-granting organizations” in each state. These non-profit organizations receive qualified contributions from individuals and businesses in their states and then use those funds to create scholarships for eligible students to attend qualified, non-public schools. The emergency funding could also be used to fund other direct educational and home-schooling expenses.¹² Although the act’s appropriations may not be as broad-based as a simple federal ESA, they would provide significantly more flexibility than the status quo in the majority of states, like Ohio, that do not have scholarship-granting opportunities.¹³

⁹ **National Student Group Scores and Student Score Gaps- 8th Grade Reading**, NationsReportCard.gov (Last visited August 19, 2020); **National Student Group Scores and Student Score Gaps- 8th Grade Mathematics**, NationsReportCard.gov (Last visited August 19, 2020).

¹⁰ Emma Dorn, Bryan Hancock, Jimmy Sarakatsannis, and Ellen Viruleg, **COVID-19 and Student Learning in the United States: The Hurt Could Last a Lifetime**, McKinsey and Company, June 1, 2020.

¹¹ Lindsey Burke, Greg R. Lawson, **Education Savings Accounts: Expanding Education Options for Ohio**, The Buckeye Institute, May 31, 2017; Greg R. Lawson, **Giving Families Certainty: Enhancing Education with Education Savings Accounts**, The Buckeye Institute, May 14, 2020.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

Second, the legislation would allow for a permanent dollar-for-dollar federal tax credit for individuals and corporations to contribute to scholarship-granting organizations. Although capped at \$5 billion annually, this allowance would lay a foundation for building more long-term school choice scholarships and initiatives as school choice options become increasingly popular.

Third, the School Choice Now Act would let the states and private sector partners design their own tax credit scholarships. So far, 18 states already have some form of tax credit scholarship,¹⁴ but more states may follow their lead given the act's language clarifying that any education provider (religious or secular) may participate in such scholarship programs without fear of federal control or bureaucrats looking over their shoulders. Tax credit scholarships could function much like an ESA, giving families additional resources to augment their child's education.

Finally, the School Choice Now Act could help expand Ohio's current school choice options. And by offering additional resources to offset start-up costs at the state level, the act could spur new school choice options beyond tax credit scholarship programs, such as state-based ESAs.¹⁵

Conclusion

The disruption and uncertainty created by the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the need to give families educational options for their K-12 children. Public school districts, despite their best efforts, do not provide ideal learning environments or curricula for all students. School choice initiatives like voucher programs, tax credit scholarships, education savings accounts, and charter schools have proven to be effective, popular alternatives. The School Choice Now Act being considered in Congress can provide needed educational funding and resources for private schools and families. Although not a panacea for the disruptions of COVID-19, the act would create flexible scholarships and offer incentives for more state-led initiatives to help families tailor educational opportunities to fit the specific needs of their students.

¹⁴ **What is a Tax-Credit Scholarship?**, EdChoice.org (Last visited August 19, 2020).

¹⁵ Greg R. Lawson, **Giving Families Certainty: Enhancing Education with Education Savings Accounts**, The Buckeye Institute, May 14, 2020.

About the Author

Greg R. Lawson is the research fellow at The Buckeye Institute.

In this role, Lawson works with all members of the Buckeye research team with a particular focus on occupational licensing, local government, and education issues. He is also Buckeye's primary liaison to the Statehouse where he educates policymakers in both the legislative and executive branches on free-market solutions to Ohio's challenges.

Prior to his position at Buckeye, Lawson served in the Ohio General Assembly as a Legislative Service Commission fellow. He then went on to several government affairs roles focusing on numerous public policy topics, including Medicaid, school choice, transportation funding, and Ohio's Building Code. He also has a background in fundraising, grassroots organizing, and communications and served for five years on the boards of two Columbus-based charter schools.



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