

# POLICY MEMO

## EXPAND OHIO ACE & ADOPT A “STUDENTS FIRST” APPROACH TO EDUCATION FUNDING MAY 16, 2022

### The Buckeye Institute’s Recommendation

With some of the state’s **\$2.6 billion** in federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding, Ohio should adopt a “students first” approach to education funding. State lawmakers should expand the **Ohio Afterschool Child Enrichment** (ACE) program to **400 percent** of the federal poverty guidelines and increase K-12 education savings accounts—or ESAs—to \$1,000 for ACE-eligible students who lost classroom time during the pandemic.

### Background

Long-term COVID-19 learning loss threatens to derail academic and professional success for far too many students. Pandemic-related education varies across Ohio schools and demographics, but studies—including those from **The Ohio State University** and **McKinsey and Company**—show that many students may be anywhere from several months to a full academic year behind where they would have been without the COVID-19 interruption. Left unaddressed, these lingering effects may significantly reduce **lifetime earnings** for today’s students.

To avert this **looming crisis**, Ohio should enhance its current school choice options, which already include **five voucher programs** and a robust network of public charter schools. It should expand Ohio ACE eligibility from 300 percent to **400 percent** of the federal poverty guidelines—the same, top income level used for the **EdChoice scholarship** program. And, for ACE-eligible students who lost classroom time during the pandemic, Ohio should increase the student’s ESA contribution from \$500 to \$1,000.

Flexible ESAs will help families close pandemic-related learning gaps. As The Buckeye Institute’s **research** shows, an expanded ESA program would enable parents to tailor their child’s education to better meet a student’s individual learning needs. ESAs can pay for private schools (as current voucher programs do) and can also pay for additional educational expenses such as textbooks, tutors, online classes, and even be saved for college.

### Conclusion

Ohio’s K-12 students have been harmed by the COVID-19 disruption. To prevent further long-term damage, lawmakers should give families the financial resources needed to help close the educational gaps exposed by the pandemic. Wisely spent, ARPA dollars could help Ohio take a critical first step toward a “students first” approach to education funding with an expanded ACE program followed by making broad-based education savings accounts available to more families.