

# POLICY MEMO

PUT STUDENTS FIRST &  
EXPAND SCHOOL CHOICE  
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## The Buckeye Institute's Recommendation

Overcoming Ohio's **historic post-pandemic decline** in academic performance among K-12 students is an urgent policy priority. To reverse that decline, state leaders should expand school choice options—including universal vouchers—to empower parents to tailor learning resources to meet their child's educational needs; and use some of the **\$6 billion budget surplus** to close the funding gap between Ohio's charter and district schools.

## Background

Studies out of **Ohio State University** and the **Thomas B. Fordham Institute** show an alarming loss of learning among Ohio's K-12 students. The Fordham Institute study, for example, shows statewide math proficiency scores have declined 10 percent among fourth and sixth graders and have fallen 14 percent among eighth graders compared to just before the pandemic. Proficiency rates in high school algebra and geometry exams are down 12 and eight points, respectively; and reading proficiency remains five points below its pre-pandemic level among eighth graders and high schoolers. These declines are even sharper among Ohio's Black and Hispanic students who were already lagging prior to the pandemic.

To reverse these declines, Ohio policymakers should make it easier for families to provide the best education for their children by allowing them to tailor academic environments and resources to fit their children's learning needs. One student may thrive in the local public school, while their sibling would do better in a charter or private school across town. Students deserve academic options.

Ohio's EdChoice and charter schools form the core of those options—and for good reason. Voucher programs have been **successful** across the country at improving high school graduation and college enrollment rates. Governor Mike DeWine has wisely **proposed** building on that success by expanding EdChoice eligibility to families earning up to 400 percent of the federal poverty line, and sending additional resources to high-performing charter schools. The Ohio House of Representatives extended EdChoice eligibility to 450 percent of poverty. These were positive steps, but the Ohio Senate can and should go further. **Senate Bill 11** would do exactly that—by making all students eligible for EdChoice vouchers and by raising Ohio's tax credit for home schooling families. Universal voucher eligibility is the least Ohio should do given the growth of universal **education savings accounts** like those being created in **Arizona, Iowa, Utah,** and **Florida** for every student that wants one.

The Ohio Senate should also use the budget process to close the 25 percent funding gap on average between **charter schools** and public district schools. Charter schools receive **far less** than traditional district schools because they receive no local tax dollars and have no access to the **Ohio Facilities Construction Commission** to help cover building costs. The **current version** of

the budget includes a \$3,000 increase for disadvantaged students in high-performing charter schools through the **Quality Community School Support Fund** and an additional \$500 per charter student to aid in capital construction costs. These are laudable first steps, but all brick-and-mortar charter schools should have access to more funding. An additional \$1,000 per-pupil would help reduce the regrettable funding disparity considerably.

Finally, the eligibility criteria for receiving money from the Quality Community School Support Fund unintentionally limit innovative models from out-of-state by restricting funding to new schools that use a **management operator**. Many charter schools use management operators, but not all do, and those start-up schools that don't are ineligible for funding through the quality charter school initiative unless the current rules are changed.

### **Conclusion**

Ohio's coffers are overflowing with surplus taxpayer cash. That surplus affords policymakers the unique opportunity to address a disturbing trend in K-12 education without overcommitting state resources to programs Ohio cannot afford. Expanding vouchers and school choice initiatives and investing in successful charter school programs to reduce funding disparities will go a long way toward repairing the damage and learning loss inflicted by the pandemic lockdowns. Every student should have the opportunity to learn in academic environments most suited to them, and state policymakers should take this historic opportunity to provide it.