



THE BUCKEYE INSTITUTE

Put Students First with Universal School Choice

Interested Party Testimony
Ohio Senate Education Committee
Ohio House Bill 33

Greg R. Lawson, Research Fellow
The Buckeye Institute

May 10, 2023

As Submitted

Thank you, Chair Brenner, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Committee, for the opportunity to submit written testimony regarding K-12 education policy in House Bill 33.

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 policymakers must help our K-12 students overcome a **historic decline** in academic performance brought on by the COVID-19 school closures. Studies out of **The Ohio State University** and the **Thomas B. Fordham Institute** show alarming learning loss. The Fordham Institute study, for example, reports that statewide math proficiency scores have dropped 10 percent among fourth and sixth graders and have fallen 14 percent among eighth graders compared to the academic years just before the pandemic. Such declines make expanding and improving school choice initiatives for families even more imperative. Sensible school choice provisions in House Bill 33 will help, but the Ohio Senate can and should go further.

Governor Mike DeWine **proposed** extending Ohio's EdChoice voucher eligibility to 400 percent of the federal poverty line. A good start. The House went a bit further and has proposed extending household eligibility up to 450 percent of the poverty line. A healthy improvement. But with a **\$6 billion surplus** of taxpayer money currently sitting in state coffers, now is the time for the Senate to make all students eligible for Ohio's most successful school choice program to date and increase funding for our public charter schools.

Learning needs vary—even among children in the same family. The local public school may be perfectly fine for one child, while a sibling would learn better in a charter school, a private school, or a different school across town. EdChoice, the state's largest voucher program, acknowledges those differences and gives **more than 57,000 students** and their families more academic options. And those options are important. A **meta-analysis of rigorous studies** shows improved test scores for voucher recipients, and other **studies** show more parental satisfaction, higher graduation rates, and better college attendance.

As The Buckeye Institute outlined in an op-ed published earlier this week in **The Lima News**, EdChoice would grow under House Bill 33, but many working-class families would still be ineligible. A recent **analysis** by The Buckeye Institute found that under the House's and administration's budget proposals a two-income, one-child family in Lima with a postal worker and a nurse each earning the median pay in their fields would not qualify for an EdChoice voucher. Similarly, neither would a two-child Cleveland household with a power-line installer and a plumber, or a Dayton-area police officer and teacher with two kids. These working-class families deserve the same opportunity to help their children succeed in school with an educational environment that best fits their students' needs.

Families That Won't Qualify for a Voucher Under the Ohio House Plan

					
	Adam and Evelyn	Carlos and Sarah	Mike and Sue	Dave and Greta	Tim and Ann
Occupations	Power-Line Installer/Repairer & Plumber	Postal Worker & Nurse	Police Officer & Teacher	Firefighter & Police Officer	Construction Manager & Dental Hygienist
Where They Live	Cleveland	Lima	Dayton	Cincinnati	Columbus
Number of Kids	2	1	2	3	3
Voucher Eligible Under House Plan	No	No	No	No	No
Total Annual Cost of Tuition for All Kids in the Family	Bethany Lutheran School \$9,300 annually for 2 kids	Temple Christian School \$5,741 annually for 1 kid	Chaminade-Julienne Catholic High School \$24,800 annually for 2 kids	Miami Valley Christian Academy \$24,680 annually for 3 kids	Clintonville Academy \$26,130 annually for 3 kids

Salary Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Ohio Department of Education & The Buckeye Institute Salary Database
Icon Credit: FlatIcon.com - Trazobanana, Freepik, Smashicons



Vouchers are not the only way for the General Assembly to help. Public charter schools can be another invaluable option for families. Charter schools currently receive far fewer dollars than traditional district schools and have no access to the **Ohio Facilities Construction Commission** to help cover building costs even though they *are* public schools. The Senate should use the budget process to close the 25 percent funding gap on average between **charter schools** and public district schools. The current budget proposal 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.

State coffers are brimming with surplus taxpayer cash. Expanding vouchers and investing in successful charter school programs to reduce funding disparities will go a long way toward regaining lost academic ground, and will help Ohio keep pace with significant education reforms already underway in **Arizona, Iowa, Utah, and Florida**. Every K-12 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.

Thank you for your time and attention.

About The Buckeye Institute

Founded in 1989, The Buckeye Institute is an independent research and educational institution – a think tank – whose mission is to advance free-market public policy in the states.

The Buckeye Institute is a non-partisan, non-profit, and tax-exempt organization, as defined by section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue code. As such, it relies on support from individuals, corporations, and foundations that share a commitment to individual liberty, free enterprise, personal responsibility, and limited government. The Buckeye Institute does not seek or accept government funding.



The Lima News

School choice for every child, every family, every community

The Lima News

By Greg R. Lawson

May 5, 2023

Ohio's voucher programs and other school choice options need to be made available to every child and every family in every community. The state has a \$6 billion surplus of taxpayer money sitting in its coffers. As the Ohio Senate finalizes the state's biennial budget, it should direct some of that excess to pay for putting K-12 students and their academic success first.

The COVID school closures led to historic declines in scholastic performance across the state. Studies out of The Ohio State University and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute show alarming learning loss. The Fordham Institute study, for example, reports that statewide math proficiency scores have dropped 10 percent among fourth and sixth graders and have fallen 14 percent among eighth graders compared to the academic years just before the pandemic.

As a long-time school choice champion, Senate President Matt Huffman knows that voucher programs and other school choice initiatives can help students regain lost ground and reverse these disturbing trends. School vouchers have been successful across the country at improving high school graduation and college enrollment rates—two keys to long-term success. For his part, Gov. Mike DeWine has rightly proposed expanding eligibility for Ohio's premier voucher program, EdChoice, to include families earning up to 400 percent of the federal poverty line. The Ohio House of Representatives went further in its budget proposal and extended EdChoice eligibility to 450 percent of that line.

Both proposals are commendable, but the Ohio Senate can do even better. EdChoice vouchers should be available for every student, regardless of zip code or household income. And with billions of surplus dollars stashed in Columbus, now is the time.

Consider that even under the House's proposed budget, many working-class families around the state would still be ineligible for an EdChoice voucher. A recent analysis by The Buckeye Institute found that under the House's and administration's budget proposals a two-income, one-child family in Lima with a postal worker and a nurse each earning the median pay in their fields would not qualify for an EdChoice voucher.

Similarly, neither would a two-child Cleveland household with a power-line installer and a plumber, or a Dayton-area police officer and teacher with two kids. These working-class families

deserve the same opportunity to help their children succeed in school with an educational environment that best fits their students' needs. And leaders in the General Assembly should use the state's current largesse to ensure that they have it.

Removing household income eligibility restrictions would allow every family in Ohio to choose the school and learning environment that is right for them. Such restrictions penalize children in hardworking families and create perverse disincentives for parents to reduce their income or risk losing their child's voucher. Child-rearing parents have enough difficult choices to make, that should never be one of them.

Ohio was an early adopter of school choice programs and has remained a national leader in helping students find the right academic fit. Other states have since followed Ohio's school choice lead — especially in the wake of pandemic lockdowns and learning loss — and have adopted universal voucher programs for their students.

Others are now pursuing even bolder policies. Arizona, Iowa, Utah and Florida, for example, have embraced education savings accounts to help families pay for academic resources, tutors and other scholastic aids, because as every parent knows, education costs more than just tuition.

Facing catastrophic learning loss among its K-12 constituents but blessed with record cash-on-hand, the Ohio General Assembly can afford — at the very least — to expand EdChoice eligibility to include every child in every family living in every community. It can, and it should.

Greg R. Lawson is a research fellow at The Buckeye Institute. His column does not necessarily reflect the opinion of The Lima News editorial board or AIM Media, owner of The Lima News.

