

POLICY MEMO

FULFILLING THE PROMISE OF
PUTTING STUDENTS FIRST
JANUARY 8, 2025

The Buckeye Institute's Recommendation

Ohio lawmakers recently promised to put students first by making school choice universally available. That was the right thing to do. To fulfill that promise, the General Assembly should:

- Resist any efforts to roll back EdChoice eligibility or scholarships;
- Include disadvantaged pupil aid in EdChoice scholarship allocations;
- Reform the transportation system for public charter and private school families;
- Ease charter school access to unused district school buildings;
- Create financing capacity for non-district schools to use for classroom expansion; and
- Issue state report cards to improve information available to parents.

Background

In the last **operating budget**, the General Assembly finally allowed all families to obtain EdChoice scholarships, effectively making school choice universal throughout the state. The scholarships have already proven **wildly popular** as EdChoice recipients have more than doubled recent annual totals, rising from 50, 200 (2021), 57, 400 (2022), 62,300 (2023) to nearly 130,000 in 2024. Lawmakers should commit to retaining universal eligibility and resist any effort to limit its scope or reduce scholarship amounts under the false premise of saving funds for public district schools. District schools are **funded based on actual enrollment** and all locally raised dollars remain in the district even if a student leaves, so the EdChoice program does not cost school districts state money.

The General Assembly should also include the appropriate **disadvantaged pupil impact aid** (DPIA) in EdChoice scholarships. Currently, EdChoice awards \$6,166 for grades K–8 and \$8,408 for grades 9–12, but for many disadvantaged households these amounts do not come close to covering education costs. Public district and public charter schools both receive additional per-student DPIA resources for every economically disadvantaged enrolled—a sensible means of ensuring that students facing more significant learning issues can receive the **extra assistance** needed to be successful. But DPIA funding does not convey to EdChoice recipients, thereby preventing some families from obtaining help from alternative education providers due to cost and placing an undue burden on the schools that take on such students.

Unfortunately, despite a legal mandate for districts to transport or offset the costs to parents transporting school choice students, some districts still make transporting students to selected schools difficult. Columbus City Schools, for example, made **headlines** by deeming transportation “impractical” for many students choosing private or public charter schools. Even after the Ohio attorney general **took action**, many families struggle with getting their students to their chosen schools. Lawmakers should immediately amend the **statute** governing the

parameters for determining “impractical” transportation. In the longer run, state and local policymakers should shift from a district-based transportation system to a regional system that can more efficiently move students across all schools within a county, whether district, public charter, or private.

Regrettably, public school districts continue to stymie school choice by not allowing charter school operators to buy unused public district school buildings. In many cases, districts have gone so far as to **demolish buildings** rather than sell them, making it harder for alternative education providers to find suitable buildings for their students. **Ohio law** gives charter schools a right of first refusal to purchase “unused” buildings, but districts find creative ways to avoid calling their buildings “unused” as currently defined. The General Assembly should amend the statute to prevent such unsportsmanlike gamesmanship that violates the spirit of the law.

As The Buckeye Institute **recommended**, lawmakers should develop innovative financing models for alternative education providers that make it easier to renovate existing structures and add classroom space as more students take advantage of universal school choice options. Examples of such financial models include a revolving loan program offering low- or no-interest loans for classroom expansion and low-cost financing options through the successful **state-linked deposit programs**.

Finally, the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce’s annual **report cards** rating the state’s public schools have replaced easy-to-understand letter grades with an ambiguous star rating system. The report cards should revert to the letter grade system with straightforward explanations of the scores and the standards used to generate them.

Conclusion

Ohio lawmakers should keep the state’s promise to enhance and expand school choice for families. Students should come first, whether they learn at their local district school, a charter school, or one of Ohio’s many alternative education providers. State leaders should take commonsense steps to secure universal school choice and resist any efforts to undermine its success.