

Michigan Aims to Catch Ohio, Give Families Extra Education Aid

Buckeye State public school parents already have access to supplemental dollars

By Ben DeGrow | May 2022

Michigan parents may soon get some of the same help Ohio parents are now receiving to cover for extra education expenses.

Ohio's Afterschool Child Enrichment or ACE account program opened to parents Monday, the Buckeye Institute reports. Eligible families — including those earning up to about \$83,000 a year for a family of four — can receive \$500 to cover the costs of “tutoring, curricula, day camp fees, language and music classes, and field trips.” Recipients are free to decide which services and providers they will enlist to help their child catch up from pandemic-related challenges.

ACE accounts draw on federal COVID funds, meaning there is no strain on state taxpayers. The accounts put these resources directly in the hands of those best equipped to make education-related decisions — parents. It allows them to supplement public school instruction by bringing in more

partners and resources to support their children's learning and growth.

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A growing number of states offer flexible education savings accounts, larger than the ACE offerings, to smaller groups of students, typically those with disabilities. A notable exception is the Hope Scholarship, which offers

over \$4,000 each to more than 90% of West Virginia K-12 students.

Ohio stands out in providing the small but broad supplemental aid made possible by ACE accounts to public school parents. Next door, Indiana stands ready to follow Ohio's lead.

Some Michigan lawmakers want to use leftover federal COVID relief dollars to fund accounts that would allow parents here the same sort of flexible education purchasing power, but with more money. The proposed Learning Loss Recovery Grants would be worth up to \$1,500 per child. Low-income

families and students who suffered most from pandemic-related school closures would be given priority treatment.

Separate but identical House and Senate bills have passed through committee but await full floor votes. A new Michigan State University report strengthens the case for these accounts, showing that students learned substantially less than expected amid the disrupted instruction of the 2020-21 school year.

Katharine Strunk, one of the professors who wrote the report, told Bridge Michigan that “one-on-one tutoring and small group tutoring targeted for struggling students” could help many students. Tutoring is one of the main ways Michigan families could use the proposed grant funds. Given that the state’s public schools are taking in \$6 billion in federal COVID relief, it’s a minor request to offer a tiny percentage of that total to parents focused on helping their children catch up.

But the political prospects are clouded by Gov. Whitmer’s vetoes of similar proposals last year. The first aimed to give parents \$1,000 scholarships for struggling young readers. Whitmer also blocked a \$500 million Student Opportunity Scholarship plan backed by the Mackinac Center. A separate group is collecting voter signatures to bring the second proposal back for consideration in 2022.

The scholarship plan offers flexible spending to families, regardless of the type of schooling they

want to pursue. That would help eligible families pay for their child’s private education or homeschooling if they so choose. But another aspect of the plan resembles Ohio’s ACE accounts. Parents of public school students could access \$500 grants to supplement the tax-funded education their children already receive.

Three key differences could make Michigan’s supplemental scholarships more helpful than the Buckeye plan. First, it would be funded by tax-credit donations rather than federal dollars, encouraging local philanthropy to provide sustainable aid. Second, a higher income threshold: about \$103,000 a year for a family of four. This would allow dollars to reach more students. Third, students with disabilities could tap into even more funding, up to \$1,100 each.

When it comes to many kinds of educational choice, Ohio has Michigan beat – for now. But supporters of expanding student opportunities should take heart. Momentum is building to transform this version of the interstate rivalry in a way that helps children in both states.

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