

EDUCATION

OPPORTUNITY SCHOLARSHIPS



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COURSE ACCESS



Course Access is a technology-driven education reform approach that allows K-12 students to access quality courses regardless of location.



To date, 12 states have passed a Course Access (or similar) program.

SUMMARY

MODERNIZING EDUCATION TO UNLEASH ACADEMIC POTENTIAL

In Tennessee, we now see a groundswell of support for greater educational choice. In fact, parental choice has become overwhelmingly popular across varying demographics and socio-economic backgrounds.

- In the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice’s latest national survey, 69 percent of parents with school-aged children were supportive of opportunity scholarships—up significantly from 59 percent in 2012.
- Most interestingly, those most supportive of choice options are minorities and the newer generations: African-Americans (74 percent), Hispanics (72 percent), and young adults (69 percent).
- More than 35 private school choice programs have been enacted nationwide.
- In 2013-2014, more than 308,000 students participated in private school choice programs across the country.

Yet, here in Tennessee, private school choice is only an option for families with students receiving a special needs education. While this is an important first step, thousands of students across our state are still waiting for the opportunity to unleash their academic potential.

TENNESSEE’S STUDENTS DESERVE THE BEST

In addition to bringing about opportunity scholarships for Tennessee families, we should also follow other states that have embraced even more options that are empowering families in bold new ways. Tennessee took a step in the right direction in 2015 by passing education savings accounts (or Individualized Education Accounts) for students with special needs. We should continue this encouraging progress in 2016 by embracing a similar reform that offers a menu of options for all students to receive a customized education that best suits their unique needs.

Introducing Course Access:

- Course Access is a technology-driven education reform approach that allows K-12 students to access quality courses regardless of location.
- To date, 12 states have passed a Course Access (or similar) program.
- Course Access maximizes the use of existing state and local resources to better serve students and ensures districts are evolving with the needs of the 21st century student.
- Students can continue to be enrolled in their public school, but receive access to advanced placement classes from area public schools and language courses from local universities, earn industry certification for workforce training, and stay on course for graduation, *even* while pursuing time-intensive athletic or artistic activities.
- Families can select the best courses for their children from an online catalog of in-person, online, and blended courses.
- Taking place in small and large districts, rural and suburban, these cost-effective strategies harness technology to strengthen districts and offer new opportunities for all students.

It is time for Tennessee to offer a robust opportunity scholarship program and bring the latest innovations in academic freedom to Tennessee families through Course Access.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

OPPORTUNITY SCHOLARSHIPS

Don't opportunity scholarships (or vouchers) hurt public schools by letting private schools "cherry pick" the best students, leaving the worst performing students behind?

No.

Contrary to popular belief, the vast majority of private schools are not highly selective when it comes to voucher students. In the programs currently existing, significant portions of participants are members of an underrepresented minority. Consider Indiana, for example. In Indiana's traditional public schools, 79% of students are white, 11% are African-American, and 7% are Hispanic. In the state's voucher program, just 51% are white, while 20% are African-American and 19% are Hispanic, according to the latest data available.

Aren't private schools way too expensive for a voucher to make any difference?

No.

A study of Tennessee private schools found that the median tuition was approximately \$5,240 for elementary schools, \$5,450 for middle schools, and \$6,275 for high schools. This is far less than the maximum scholarship amount provided in the proposed program, which averages nearly \$7,000. Many schools also offer assistance to low-income students already. In a recent survey of private schools, 87% of respondents provide some form of tuition assistance to their students. When low-income students are empowered to seek out these existing forms of assistance, in addition to their voucher, additional funds are opened up for more students.

Do vouchers drain resources from public schools?

No.

By only taking a portion of the per-pupil funding for each voucher student (but removing the cost of the student), vouchers actually increase the money available per-pupil in public schools. A Beacon Center study found that, on average, school districts would *save* more than \$600 each time a student chose to use a voucher, with larger systems saving more than \$1,000 per child.

I love the concept of school choice, but my school district is doing a great job as a whole. Would a voucher program help my district?

Yes!

A robust voucher system is not designed simply to put more students in private school seats. It's designed to enable parents to find the best fit for their children and empower them hold their schools accountable where they fall short. A zoned school may be perfect for 98% of students, but a terrible option for the last 2%. Vouchers work to help that last 2%, who would otherwise be forced into a school that doesn't fit their needs based solely on their ZIP code.

COURSE ACCESS

Is Course Access a private school choice program, meaning kids can no longer be enrolled in the public school?

No.

Students who choose to participate in a Course Access program will remain enrolled as full-time students at their public school, but with the opportunity to go “off campus” for classes that the public school cannot offer. For example, participants may choose to take a Chinese language course from a local university, earn industry certification for workforce training, or take an accelerated learning program offered online. This allows for public school students from both small and large districts, rural and suburban, to make use of cost-effective strategies and technology to strengthen district learning opportunities for area students.

Does a Course Access program take away funding from the public school to pay for these “off campus” or private classes?

No.

Much like opportunity scholarships or education savings accounts, Course Access programs use a portion of the funding already spent on a participating student to be used as flex spending for payment to Course Access instruction providers. Simply put, the state determines how much flexible spending per participating pupil is appropriate, and that student may then use these funds to pay for approved Course Access instruction. For example, in Louisiana, the State Board of Education determines the amount the state is willing to fund per course, depending on its content. It ranges from \$275 per credit for a sociology class to \$1,325 for an intensive, in-person welding trade course.

I am afraid that a student would be enticed to pay for a class that is not essential, or even reputable, for their requirements to graduate high school or post-secondary career. Can anyone be a provider and take state money?

No.

The State Board of Education, State Department of Education, or appropriate state body must approve providers. To gain approval, applicants must go through an extensive review process, which may include multiple interviews with state overseers, background checks, curriculum submissions, performance audits, and other similarly intensive checks to ensure the highest quality and standards. The state may also reserve the right to discontinue a provider’s service if they become concerned about fraudulent or otherwise worrisome activity that falls outside the guidelines of the state-established code for provider services.

Can a student be enrolled in Course Access and still participate in public school athletics?

Yes!

Because Course Access participants are still considered full-time enrollees of the public school system, they are eligible to continue participating in the public school athletic program.

STORIES

MARSHALL SHANKS

OPPORTUNITY SCHOLARSHIPS

Marilyn Johnson lost her husband when their son Marshall was just a baby. Understanding the tremendous challenges that come from living in the roughest area of the Memphis inner city, Marilyn made a conscious decision to find ways that Marshall could escape these dangers through a better education in a safer environment. “We knew he was going to a private school,” Marilyn says, explaining that she made this decision with Marshall’s father before he passed away. Fortunately, she found the Memphis Opportunity Scholarship Trust (MOST), a privately funded charity that provides low-income students like Marshall with the opportunity to attend a private school.

“MOST has been so nice,” Marilyn says. “They have continued the funding as long as he maintains a certain GPA and all the community service that goes with it.” Marshall, now a junior in high school, has earned more than 80 hours of community service. In fact, Marshall truly is an extraordinary

student and member of his community. Not only does he complete his required community service hours, but at just 12-years-old, he launched “One Block at a Time,” a revitalization project he hopes will help others who reside in the neighborhood he still lives in today.

Marshall truly is an extraordinary student and member of his community.



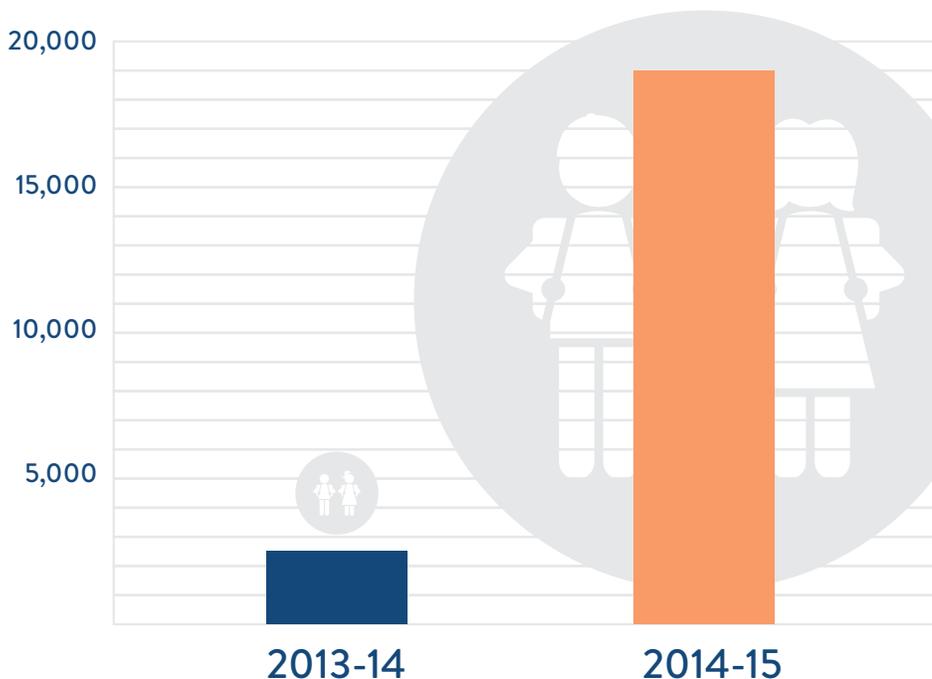
COURSE ACCESS

Course Access is a burgeoning, modern education reform movement that's quickly sweeping the nation and having an immediate positive impact within the states that have adopted legislation. Louisiana has experienced tremendous success following the implementation of Course Access in 2013. From Advanced Placement courses to career and technical education, students can choose from a simple online catalog of in-person, online, and blended courses.

In the 2014-2015 school year, 19,000 Louisiana students enrolled in Course Access instruction—a 700% increase from the previous school year. Ken Bradford, Assistant Superintendent for the Louisiana Department of Education, has been a champion of the program since seeing the results from participating students.

"If Louisiana and the rest of the nation are to compete in the 21st century, we have to go beyond the limitations of the traditional schoolhouse and provide each student with an education that meets with their vision of life beyond 12th grade." – Ken Bradford, Louisiana Department of Education

LOUISIANA ENROLLMENT IN COURSE ACCESS PROGRAMS



CHANGING THE STATE OF EDUCATION IN LOUISIANA

ANALYSIS

In 2015, the General Assembly passed a law providing Individualized Education Accounts (IEAs, or otherwise known as Education Savings Accounts) for children with special learning needs, making Tennessee just the fourth state in the nation to offer this innovative academic approach to families of qualified students. IEAs allow parents to customize their child's education by culling the highest quality resources available to craft a tailored academic environment. Perhaps that means that the student will attend his or her public school for science and math classes in the morning, receive speech therapy before lunch, attend an area private school specializing in autistic instruction for social sciences in the afternoon, and finish his or her days with a home tutor for grammar and language.

Indeed, this modern approach to learning holds the promise of bringing much needed relief to families who have struggled to find an appropriate environment for their special needs' student. However, as a society we know that every child is unique and learns in differing ways. In fact, children raised in the same household will still develop different strengths and weaknesses. Understanding this important fact means embracing the ability for parents and educators to partner on a customized learning approach to best address the specific academic needs of each child.

Tennessee lawmakers have the opportunity to build upon the foundation of Individualized Education Act by extending individualized learning opportunities to all families across our state, regardless of income or socio-economic background. Two established and successful means of providing these options to parents are opportunity scholarships and Course Access education plans.

THE NEED FOR CHOICE

In 2010, the *Wall Street Journal* proclaimed that 2011 would be "the year of school choice." Since that time, we have moved from a nation largely consuming a mass-education model through the public classroom to a nation seeking tailored academics for our individual children. Twenty-one states, plus Washington, D.C., and Douglas Co., Colorado have a substantial private school choice program. Unfortunately, Tennessee is not one of them.¹

As a society we know that every child is unique and learns in differing ways.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of Tennessee's inaction is the disproportionate consequences the lack of choice wrecks on minority families and those who come from poor socio-economic backgrounds. According to the American Federation for Children, over one million students fail to graduate with a diploma each year. That translates to over 6,000 dropouts a day or one dropout every 29 seconds. The statistics just get more alarming:

- Nearly half of the public schools across the country serving a disproportionate number of minority students are labeled as failing by their state departments of education.
- Only 24 percent of eighth and 12th grade students have solid writing skills.
- Students who qualify for the federal free and reduced-price lunch program scored 27 points below students from families with higher incomes on NAEP testing.
- The national achievement gap between lower- and higher-income students is 27 points.
- Students who drop out of school are twice as likely to end up in poverty.
- The United States is ranked 14th in reading, 17th in science, and 25th in math worldwide.²

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Sadly, Tennessee’s inner-city minority students are trapped in some of the worst educational environments in the country. Three-quarters of African-American students in Memphis-area schools could not read at grade level when they graduated eighth grade. In his article, “Beale Street Weeps for Our Children,” Michael Holzman asserts that, “Recruitment for jail in the Memphis area begins in the schools.” He cites the latest data from the 2011-2012 U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights report, which found that black students enrolled in the Memphis public school system accounted for 90 percent of the 26,000 out-of-school suspensions, 11,500 in-school suspensions, and 4,400 expulsions.³

Tennessee’s inner-city minority students are trapped in some of the worst educational environments in the country.

These sad statistics may explain why school choice is becoming increasingly popular, especially amongst minority communities. The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice’s latest survey found that 69 percent of parents with school-aged children were supportive of vouchers—compared to 59 percent in 2012. Most interestingly, those most supportive of choice options are minorities and the newer generations: African-Americans (74 percent), Hispanics (72 percent), and young adults (69 percent).⁴

MEMPHIS MOTHER: Opportunity Scholarships Make a World of Difference

Fortunately, we know that by embracing more choice options, we’re able to bring hope to many of these students currently trapped in a system that determines one’s educational journey based on a family’s ZIP code.

Consider the story of Marilyn Johnson and her son, Marshall Shanks from Memphis, Tennessee. Despite losing her husband when Marshall was just 13 months old and living in a difficult neighborhood, Marilyn was determined to find a quality education for her son. “We knew he was going to a private school,” Marilyn says, explaining that she made this decision with Marshall’s father before he passed away. She was determined to give her son an opportunity to escape the crime and destitution of his current surroundings.

When Marilyn learned about the Memphis Opportunity Scholarship Trust (MOST), she knew it was the right decision for Marshall. “MOST has been so nice,” Marilyn says. “They have continued the funding as long as he maintains a certain GPA and all the community service that goes with it.” Marshall, a junior in high school, has earned more than 80 hours of community service. Throughout Marshall’s academic career, MOST shared Marilyn’s high expectations for her son’s future. “Their vision matches my vision,” Marilyn says. “He had to watch his attitude, and when people meet him for the first time, they ask what school he has gone to because they know there is something different about him.”

In fact, Marshall truly is an extraordinary student and member of his community. Not only does he complete his required community service hours, but at just 12-years-old, he launched “One Block at a Time,” a revitalization project he hopes will help others who reside in the neighborhood he still lives in today. Marshall’s hard work is already paying dividends. Marshall will be a participant in a Harvard University leadership program, and he is already taking college courses as a high school junior. “You cannot afford not to invest in your child,” Marilyn says.⁵

THE FACTS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES

Marilyn and Marshall's story is a powerful testament to the ability of opportunity scholarships to change the direction of a child's life. Studies show this phenomenon happening across states that have enacted substantial private choice programs as well. Examples as found in research from the American Federation for Children include:

- *Washington, D.C.*: Students who used their voucher in the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program graduated at a rate of 91 percent—more than 20 percentage points higher than those interested in the program who did not receive a scholarship and more than 30 percent higher than the graduation rate of D.C. Public Schools.
- *Wisconsin*: Students participating in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program had 76.6 percent on-time graduation rate—more than 7.2 percentage points higher than the graduation rate of students in Milwaukee Public Schools.
- *New York*: African-American participants in a private school choice program were 24 percent more likely to enroll in college as a result of receiving a voucher.

Indeed, 22 empirical studies on the impacts of opportunity scholarships show positive improvements to students who participate in a private choice program as well as the students who remain within the traditional public school system. Perhaps most compellingly, there has yet to be a single empirical study that has found any negative impacts on either body of students from the implementation of a private choice program.⁶

HOW WOULD OPPORTUNITY SCHOLARSHIPS WORK IN TENNESSEE?

In 2015, the legislature considered the “Choice and Opportunity Scholarship Act,” a proposal that would bring opportunity scholarships to low-income children trapped in a failing district. Within that framework, qualifying students would include those in families with a household income of less than \$43,000 per year for a family of four. The legislation capped the number of students who could enroll in the program during its first year to 5,000, growing to 20,000 in year four. Students zoned to attend failing schools would get first shot at a scholarship. If there were still scholarships available after all such applicants had been admitted, the legislation allowed for students within a school district with at least one failing school to receive a scholarship. In all, this encompasses five counties in Tennessee: Shelby, Davidson, Knox, Hamilton, and Madison.

A 2014 Beacon Center study examined the impact of allowing a portion of the current per pupil spending to follow the child to the school of their choice. Of the five districts implicated by the proposed legislation, all would retain enough money per pupil to cover their fixed and variable costs if a qualified student opted to take an opportunity scholarship. Memphis schools would save the most money, coming out ahead by over \$1,500 per child that receives an opportunity scholarship.⁷

Tennessee legislators should consider the value behind such a proposal—one that would bring greater opportunities to children like Marshall, but also have the benefit of spending taxpayer dollars more wisely.

While opportunity scholarships remain a vehicle for positive change, particularly for families living in impoverished communities, we also urge lawmakers to consider the challenges that students in our rural communities are facing. With limited resources and lack of access to the same robust academic catalog that students in suburban Nashville may enjoy, programs like Course Access can bring these same opportunities and modernized environments to small community classrooms across the state.

**State Course
Access programs
allow K-12
students to access
to a variety of
quality courses
outside their
public school.**

WHAT IS COURSE ACCESS?

Course Access is a state-level program that provides students with expanded course offerings across learning environments from diverse, accountable providers. These programs promise to offer students expanded curricular opportunities and alternatives that meet their unique learning styles and needs. Participating students have the right to enroll in qualifying courses and earn full class credit for courses completed through the program.

State Course Access programs allow K-12 students to access a variety of quality courses outside their public school, where they remain enrolled. These programs offer students expanded curricular programs and alternatives that meet their unique learning styles and needs—and usually give students the right to enroll in programs, subject to a few limitations (e.g., the course has to fit into the student’s

graduation plan, the student must not have already passed the course). Participating students receive both state funding and full class credit for completion of a state-approved Course Access program. Course Access programs are intended to provide students with expanded access to educational opportunities by supplementing existing curricular options offered by students’ schools with courses offered by third party providers in online, blended, and/or face-to-face formats. Eligible providers can include other districts, charter schools, independent nonprofit and for-profit providers, coalitions of teachers, colleges and universities, and trade associations.

TENNESSEE CAN LEARN FROM OUR NEIGHBORS

Course Access, like opportunity scholarships, is not necessarily a new idea—rather, the program is a modernized form of a well-established education reform. In fact, Course Access actually began in Minnesota in 2006, spreading across eight other states (10, when including similar legislation) in just the last three years. States with Course Access programs now include Utah, Florida, Michigan, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Georgia, Wisconsin, and Texas. Indeed, Louisiana is pioneering the Course Access frontier by introducing innovative components such as in-person, online, and blended courses into their system.

While these programs are certainly a part of a larger digital learning movement, Course Access remains distinctive in part because of the potential array of educational opportunities that may be provided to students and educators. By adopting a Course Access model, states may also leverage effective collaboration and coordination between district leaders, the state department of education and board of education, and sister states with similar practices in place.

As the Foundation of Excellence in Education highlights, the unique components of Course Access programs include:

- ***Expanding access to resources and new learning opportunities.*** Understanding that all education systems are necessarily restricted in the variety and depth of their course options, Course Access allows large and small systems alike to partner with one another to fill in any potential gaps in course offerings. In fact, this is perhaps the most enticing aspect of Course Access programs—the potential to bring quality educational opportunities within the public school enrollment system to all students, regardless of their geographic location or zoned school.
- ***Bridging opportunities for customized learning.*** Our traditional public education system relies on a one-size-fits-all learning approach, designed to meet the academic demands of a pre-determined student prototype rather than each individual child. These systems, while reasonably conceived, can many times allow certain learners to fall behind or for more accelerated students to grow restless. As Mark Elgart, CEO of AdvancED, has explained, “We must embrace allowing students to learn their

way by offering different learning experiences that will expand the breadth and depth of our educational offerings.”

- **Opportunity for public school districts to share best practices and expand enrollment.** Many states emphasize cross-district sharing in Course Access programs to entice more students to continue receiving their educations through the public system.
- **New positions and career growth opportunities for educators.** School districts can explore new instructional positions and advancement opportunities for high quality teachers to share their specialized instruction to more students. For example, educators who have successfully incorporated digital learning instructions for their districts may be recognized and rewarded through permission to offer these programs to expanded groups of students.
- **Option for states, districts, and schools to collaborate by capitalizing on efficiencies of scale and shared information.** States considering Course Access programs have the benefit of learning from what has worked in other states, culling best practices, and working with similar providers to launch their state-based program. Furthermore, good and bad actors have been documented through formal and informal policy procedures governing the programs, which can be extracted for review in other states as they consider implementation.⁸

WHERE DO WE START?

To maximize the effectiveness of Course Access programs in Tennessee, lawmakers should draw from the successful experiences established in other states by working with policy experts and stakeholders to infuse strong accountability measures, develop and monitor provider progress, and ensure that public school districts are constantly collaborating to improve and expand access and opportunities for their students. A successful Course Access program in Tennessee will encompass the following measures:

Meaningful and rigorous state review of prospective providers and/or courses. Elements of this to address with legislation include:

- Quality instructional materials and methods (e.g., formative assessment) with clearly defined, measurable course objectives that are aligned to state standards
- Effective, transparent student engagement in recruitment and enrollment, support services, and other efforts to ensure student satisfaction
- Effective instructors
- Organizational strength, demonstrated by accreditation and/or prior performance (measured, for example, through completion rates and student growth) as well as financial health and stability
- Commitment to a continuous improvement process

Strong monitoring systems. These systems should include a process to evaluate and track student progress and completion, and have mechanisms to hold providers accountable for ensuring that students are learning and earning appropriate credit. Other ongoing issues to monitor include: student data security and use; accommodations for students with special needs; transparency regarding provider practices; and system integration (e.g., credit awards and transfer).

Flexible and sustainable funding models. The great diversity of learning opportunities possible through Course Access programs means that state authorization and oversight systems must oversee many unique learning programs, providers, grade levels, and school and district systems. Tennessee may consider phasing in a new funding model, providing districts with time and support to adjust to this change in financial practice. The state department of education or board

of education must have adequate funding and dedicated staffing to administer Course Access programs, supported (in part) by reasonable fees paid by prospective providers. Correspondingly, districts should have the right kinds of resources (and flexibility regarding those resources) to partner effectively in any Course Access program. Policymakers and state legislators will need to work together to develop protocols for all funding decisions.

Alignment with the state's broader education systems. Prior to any student registering for a course, the provider and state should work together to provide the relevant course number for every offering and to establish systems to verify student identities (in compliance with any relevant state or federal privacy policy). The state should also work with districts to make sure that district systems have the ability to accept these courses on student transcripts and records. During the course, providers should garner regular feedback from students and their schools to encourage student progress toward course completion. Upon course completion, providers should plan for students to take any required state assessments or nationally norm referenced test, including an exam administration policy and timely reporting system. The appropriate departments should include questions about each of these phases of the process as part of providers' annual monitoring reports.

Purposeful and ongoing engagement with districts and schools. As key partners in any state Course Access enterprise, districts and schools can play a vital role in helping shape the state's policy choices. This may include the representation of districts on state review and monitoring panels of providers and/or courses within the state's Course Access program. The department or board of education could provide technical assistance and training for district leaders, guidance counselors, teachers, principals, and other key district constituencies to help them understand the purpose of the Course Access program and the intended benefits.

Effective communication with students and parents. The department or board of education should ensure that information about Course Access programs is both accessible and easy to navigate for prospective enrollees. To reach parents of all backgrounds, these departments should endeavor to provide digitized academic catalogs and consider strategies to inform parents on Course Access opportunities.

Clearly defined student eligibility. State lawmakers, in consult with the state department or board of education, should ensure that clear standards exist in legislation and code that define student eligibility and identify means for student access to Course Access programs. These standards should provide clear guidance to districts, schools, students, and parents to preclude potential abuse of the system and potential misapplication of the standards.⁹

EDUCATION'S NEW FRONTIERS OFFER MORE OPTIONS TO FAMILIES

After exploring the benefits of long-standing choice programs like opportunity scholarships, alongside the innovative new approaches embraced by Individualized Education Accounts and Course Access, it is clear that the future of education reform is both bright and expansive. No longer are lawmakers and families limited to a choice between public and private. When all forms of choice are welcomed, parents and students have the ability to select a range of academic environments that give children the best possible tools for future success. We will no longer see children attending one school for six to eight hours per day, but instead well-rounded scholars who are pulling together the best of all worlds to prepare them to meet the challenges of a complex society.

By following the models outlined above, Tennessee legislators can position our state to be a leader in modernized academic opportunities provided through our public and private education systems.

ENDNOTES

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- 7 Ben Clark, "Saving Education: How School Choice Can Save Public Schools Money." The Beacon Center of Tennessee. http://www.beacontn.org/wp-content/uploads/fiscal-impacts_web.pdf.
- 8 "Leading in an Era of Change: How Districts and Schools Can Make the Most of Course Access." Foundation for Excellence in Education. <http://excelined.org/2015CourseAccessWhitePaper/>.
- 9 *Ibid.*

ABOUT THE BEACON CENTER OF TENNESSEE

The Beacon Center empowers Tennesseans to reclaim control of their lives, so that they can freely pursue their version of the American Dream. The Center is an independent, nonprofit, and nonpartisan research organization dedicated to providing expert empirical research and timely free market solutions to public policy issues in Tennessee.

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