

# Jay P. Greene's Blog

## Let a Thousand Magnolias Bloom: ESA Enrollment in Mississippi

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Citing low enrollment and bogus “research” that excludes the mountain of random-assignment studies, one anti-choice group says Mississippi’s education savings account program for students with special needs is a “failure.”

Of the more than 50,000 children with special needs in Mississippi public schools, 251 were qualified and approved to receive vouchers. Of those, only 107 appear to have used them, .0018 of one percent of Mississippi’s children with special needs.

The research claim clearly doesn’t hold water (unsurprisingly, the only gold standard study they cite is the recent one from Louisiana) but what about the low enrollment? Is this a program that parents don’t really want? Or perhaps there just aren’t enough private school seats for parents?

First, it’s pretty rich that a group that opposes educational choice cites low enrollment as a reason it is “failing.” If enrollment was high, do you think they would see that as a sign of success?

Second, the ESA program is still in its first year. As Empower Mississippi demonstrates in this helpful chart, programs that start small can grow significantly over time:

School Choice Programs For Students With Special Needs

State	First Year of Program	First Year Enrollment	Prior Year Enrollment	Percentage Change
Arizona	2009	115	349	203%
Florida (McKay)	2000	2	30,104	1505100%
Florida (Gardiner)	2015	1,627	4,270	162%
Georgia	2008	899	3,811	323%
Louisiana	2012	206	342	66%
Mississippi (Dyslexia)	2013	32	148	362%
North Carolina	2014	276	611	121%
Ohio (Autism)	2004	70	3,193	4461%
Ohio (Peterson)	2013	1,342	6,904	414%
Oklahoma	2011	6	377	6183%
South Carolina	2014	405	1,066	163%
Utah	2006	107	700	554%

As Empower Mississippi notes, detractors were probably quick to declare Florida's McKay scholarships a "failure" when only two students used them in the first year, but after experiencing 1,505,100% growth in the next decade and a half, I doubt anyone is making that case anymore.

That said, detractors might be right that there aren't enough private school seats *right now*. However, one of the purposes of educational choice is to expand the market. Greater demand should spark greater supply, if the price is right. Unfortunately, that's a big "if." The Magnolia State's ESAs are currently funded at only \$6,500 per year. Funding is tied to the state's base student cost rather than the cost for students with special needs, as Arizona does.

If Mississippi lawmakers want to see greater supply in private school seats for students with special needs — and empower parents to use the ESAs to tailor their child's education using tutors, online courses, educational therapy, etc. — then they should make sure that the ESAs are adequately funded.

[UPDATE: Grant Callen of Empower Mississippi wrote to let me know that I got one very important detail wrong: the image I used originally was of a Japanese Magnolia, not the North American Magnolia that is Mississippi's state flower. I stand corrected!]

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