

## Education alternatives put power in parents' hands

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Recently there have been an increasing number of education alternatives proposed to the existing traditional system of Delaware's public schools. The nonpublic schools are an option that has been around for a long time. One of them actually predates the founding of our country. Two other alternatives, home schooling and charters, are experiencing significant growth.

Our state legislature will soon be considering a new alternative for students with special needs, the Education Savings Account, which was initiated by Arizona in 2011. It is a parent-empowerment piece of legislation designed to enable parents of children with special needs to customize their children's educational experience. The state portion of a child's education funding is placed in a state-controlled account which the parents can access for qualified education expenses. The district retains the local portion. Qualified expenses include such things as tuition at an approved participating school, textbooks, services from a licensed or accredited practitioner or provider, payment to a licensed or accredited tutor, and, if any funds remain after high school, they could be put toward college tuition.

Another alternative is the Education Tax Credit Scholarship. The Washington Center for Education Reform describes the concept as allowing individuals or businesses (or both) to claim a credit against their tax bill for donations made to authorized organizations that in turn use those donations to fund tuition scholarships for eligible students to attend a school of their choice. Even though this program reduces the amount of taxes collected, the net result is a savings to the state. This is because the tax revenue reduction is more than offset by the reduction in education expenditures. This is in addition to the significant benefit of shifting the power of choosing a child's education from the government to the child's parent. As of 2014, 14 states have enacted tax credit-funded scholarship programs. These programs now include approximately 190,000 students, a participation level that is surpassed only by enrollment in charter schools.

A more comprehensive report on scholarship tax credits, "Expanding Educational Opportunity in Delaware," was prepared by Jason Bedrick of the CATO Institute and James E. Hosley of the Caesar Rodney Institute. Parent satisfaction with the scholarship tax credit programs has been extraordinarily high. In Georgia the Friedman Foundation survey found that 98 percent of parents of children receiving scholarships were "very satisfied" (84 percent) or "satisfied" (14

percent). In New Hampshire a survey reported that 97 percent of participating parents were satisfied. In a survey commissioned by the Florida Department of Education in 2010, 95 percent of families receiving scholarships rated their school of choice as “excellent” (75 percent) or “good” (20 percent).

With a belief that “one size doesn’t fit all” and “we can’t take a cookie-cutter approach to education,” there is little doubt that a demand exists for education alternatives. Perhaps the next education alternative on the horizon will focus on an alternative way to operate the current system.