



## We pick the five best school choice moments of 2014

By [Watchdog Staff](#)

*December 25, 2014*

In the almost twenty-five years school choice programs have existed, there's never been a year without controversy, lawsuits and plenty of heated anti-choice rhetoric.

That annual dose of sound and fury can sometimes overshadow all the good that has happened.

So as 2014 draws to a close, it's important to look back and remember some of the best moments and important advances in school choice during the year.

Watchdog surveyed some of the country's leading school choice experts, and these are their picks for the five best school choice moments of 2014.

1. Florida [became the second state](#) to adopt an education savings account program. ESAs have been called "School Choice 2.0," because instead of simply choosing a school, parents can use their ESA money to hire tutors and therapists, pay for textbooks, and even save money for college.

Before Florida's program, this type of ESA was available only in Arizona.

In Florida, ESAs are called Personalized Learning Scholarship Accounts and they're available to students with certain disabilities.

Florida's program is privately managed, which gives it an edge over Arizona's program, Jason Bedrick, a policy analyst with the Cato Institute's [Center for Educational Freedom](#), believes.

"Nonprofits can be much more flexible and meet the needs of parents, whereas in Arizona, they have some real issues with the department not actually meeting the needs," Bedrick said.

THE BEST OF 2014: School choice had plenty of great moments in 2014.

According to Bedrick, the bureaucrats in charge of Arizona's program threw away and rejected applications from Spanish speakers even if they passed an eligibility pre-screen and information

sessions were only available during business hours — times difficult for low-income working parents to attend.

These issues are less likely to be an issue with Florida’s privately managed ESA program, Bedrick contends.

2. Of course, no advance in school choice occurs without a lawsuit being filed to try to stop it.

In the case of Florida’s ESA program, the outcome of that lawsuit provided another of the year’s best moments.

In September, a judge ruled that a [teacher’s union](#) did not have the standing to challenge the ESA program.

The decision allowed nearly 1,000 students to use their accounts for educational choice.

Lindsey Burke, a Will Skillman Fellow in education at the [Heritage Foundation](#), saw this as an important and encouraging development, because ESAs have the potential to expand school choice into states where voucher programs have been rejected by the courts.

“We’re seeing this move towards real choice in education,” said Burke said.

3. Arizona’s education savings account program provided another of the year’s brightest moments.

In March, the Arizona Supreme Court [declined to accept](#) the appeal of a lawsuit brought by the Arizona School Boards Association and the Arizona Education Association.

The suit contended ESAs violated the state’s constitutional prohibition against providing public funds to religious institutions, since parents could use their ESAs to pay for tuition at religious-affiliated private schools

Advocates for the savings accounts argued that unlike vouchers, ESAs give parents multiple options.

“We were able to make the case that parents are not compelled to spend in one place,” said Jonathan Butcher, education director at the [Goldwater Institute](#).

Since this ESA program was the first of its kind in the country, Butcher believes this win will paved the way for similar programs in other states.

4. ESAs weren’t the only school choice programs to hit high notes in 2014.

In New Hampshire, [a program](#) that allows businesses to receive tax credits for donations made to organizations that provide scholarships to families to help pay for educational expenses scored a major legal victory.

New Hampshire's Supreme Court upheld the state's tax-credit scholarship program in August.

The decision allowed parents to customize students' educations and can be used by families homeschooling their children.

"There are a few reasons that my favorite school choice moment was the [New Hampshire Supreme Court unanimously rejecting a challenge to the state's scholarship tax credit law](#)," Bedrick told Watchdog.

"First, New Hampshire's scholarship tax credit law is the first in the country to include homeschoolers. It moves from 'school choice' to 'educational choice,'" Bedrick said.

"Second, the decision continues the STC laws' 100 percent record of constitutionality. That's important because other STC laws are being challenged in Alabama and Florida right now."

Lindsey Burke also selected the court decision in New Hampshire as a high point of the year.

"That was significant because the tax-credit program has an education savings account flavor to it," Burke said.

5. But for most of the experts Watchdog consulted, the best school choice moment of the year happened at the ballot box in November.

"We saw a great many school choice advocates elected across the country during this year's election. This means the progress that's been made during the last decade in school choice is only going to continue," Jim Bender, president of [School Choice Wisconsin](#), said.

Education Policy Director of the [Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty](#) C.J. Szafir, agreed, although his focus was more local.

"A very important school choice moment in 2014 was when the voters of Wisconsin decided to send an education reform-minded governor and legislature back to Madison," Szafir told Watchdog. "Although we have made some great strides in education reform, policymakers in Madison have much more work to do to further empower parents with educational choice, provide schools with more resources and tools to expand, and eliminate the unnecessary red tape."

Larry Sand, president of the [California Teachers Empowerment Network](#), also cheered the results of election day.

"The best moment — and there were many this year — I would have to say was Election Day," Sand said. "In particular, states like Wisconsin, where Scott Walker vowed to expand their

voucher program, and Rick Snyder in Michigan vowed to expand his school choice programs, and Rick Scott in Florida, despite a pending lawsuit, wants to expand the tax credit scholarships there.”