



Arizona education savings accounts aren't vouchers, study says

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Parents are using education savings accounts differently than they would use school vouchers or tax-credit scholarships, a study published Thursday by the Friedman Foundation ^[1] shows.

In Arizona, where vouchers were ruled unconstitutional, eligible families opting out of public schools can use public money from an ESA to pay for private school tuition, homeschool curricula, private tutoring, education therapy or other educational expenses.

A state appeals court recently upheld the ESA program ^[2], also called the Empowerment Scholarship, noting an important distinction: While vouchers aid private — and often faith-based — schools, ESAs aid students.

The study showed that ESAs not only are designed to work differently than vouchers, they are being used differently than vouchers ^[3].

“This is critical from a legal side, because 38 states have Blaine Amendments, or constitutional provisions that could potentially block a voucher program,” said Jonathan Butcher, education director for the Goldwater Institute and co-author of the study. “It’s really got the potential to be a robust answer to states that have Blaine Amendments, so we’re optimistic about the potential for that.”

The researchers sent a survey via email to the 179 families that participate in an online message board created by ESA parents to exchange information, and they received results in April and May. Their report includes a cautionary note on interpreting the results: since the parents were not randomly selected, the results should not be applied to all ESA families.

The 179 families on the message board, however, are more than half of the 2012-2013 participants. Their children have a variety of special needs in all grades except 10th (no parents of 10th-grade students responded to the survey), and the families have a variety of income levels.

The results, therefore, show accurately how ESA families using the message board are using the accounts, and “the findings provide new information on the different kinds of participating

families and students, how they use the accounts, and their levels of satisfaction,” according to the study.

About two thirds of parents responding to the unscientific email survey said they used the money for private school tuition, about a third for home-school curricula, a third for a tutor, two-fifths for education therapies, and a fifth for textbooks.

Almost a third of parents reported not spending any money on private school tuition.

Parents in the study also reported being satisfied with their children’s education, a finding that’s consistent with previous research on other school choice programs across the country, Butcher said.

“When they make choices for themselves, they are, by and large, more satisfied than they were in the traditional public school,” he said.

Most parents – 71 percent – reported being “very satisfied” and 29 percent reported being “satisfied” or “somewhat satisfied.” That accounts for them all – none reported themselves neutral or dissatisfied.

Jason Bedrick, policy analyst at the Cato Institute, co-authored the study.