



Research & Commentary: Expansion of Empowerment Scholarship Accounts Program to Include Bullied and Assaulted Students Would Be Great Move for Arizona

Program Would Be Open To All Arizona Children Facing A Safety Issue At School

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By Tim Benson

Legislation in the Arizona House of Representatives would expand the Empowerment Scholarship Account (ESA) program—the state’s education savings account (ESA) program for disabled students, students in foster care, students of active-duty military personnel, and children living on Indian reservations—by allowing access to students who are bullied or the victim of a crime on school property.

The program would allow children who are the “alleged victim of assault...harassment, hazing, kidnapping...aggravated assault...theft...burglary...sexual harassment...fighting, sex trafficking...or trafficking of persons for forced labor,” to be eligible for the program if “the incident occurred on school grounds, on a school bus, at a school bus stop or at a school-sponsored event or activity, including through the use of electronic technology or an electronic communication on a school computer, network, forum or mailing list.”

This expansion is sorely needed as the latest responses from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s biennial Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) show public schools in the Grand Canyon State are having a tough time keeping children safe.

The latest data from YRBSS shows 18.2 percent of Arizona high school students were bullied on school property in 2019, while 13.4 percent were the victims of cyberbullying. Another 6.7 percent were threatened or injured with a weapon on school property.

Things are apparently so bad that that 14.4 percent of Arizona high school students skipped school out of concerns for their safety, a big jump from 2017, when the number was 10.2 percent. Most frighteningly, 20.9 percent said they had seriously considered suicide, while 10.4 percent actually attempted it.

The federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) permits students to transfer to another public school under ESSA's Unsafe School Choice Option provision, but only if their current public school meets the state definition of a "persistently dangerous" school. Because states define unsafe schools so narrowly, fewer than 50 American public schools out of nearly 100,000 are labeled "persistently dangerous" each year. Expanding Empowerment Scholarship Accounts for bullied, battered, and harassed students is a logical, necessary step and one that would immediately improve the lives of many commonwealth children and give their parents peace of mind.

Copious empirical research on other school choice programs makes clear these programs offer families improved access to high-quality schools that meet their children's unique needs and circumstances, and that these programs improve academic performance and attainment and deliver a quality education at lower cost than traditional public schools.

To cite just a few examples, a recent study from EdChoice looked at the five Arizona education choice programs—Empowerment Scholarship Accounts, the Original Individual Income Tax Credit Scholarship Program, the Low-Income Corporate Income Tax Credit Scholarship Program, Lexie's Law for Disabled and Displaced Students Tax Credit Scholarship Program, and the "Switcher" Individual Income Tax Credit Scholarship Program—and found these programs have saved Arizona taxpayers between \$1.2-\$3.2 billion through Fiscal Year 2018. This works out to a savings of between \$1,861 and \$4,808 per each student participating in these programs.

A 2019 report from the Goldwater Institute found students making use of the Empowerment Scholarship Account Program come from "higher poverty" school districts at a nearly identical rate as the state's traditional neighborhood public schools. Further, the report notes, "the highest concentrations of ESA usage actually occur in the most severely economically disadvantaged communities in Arizona. Among the 10 districts with the highest share of ESA students (as a percentage of each district's overall student enrollment), eight have higher than average child poverty rates. In fact, the three districts with the highest concentrations of ESA students in the entire state have child poverty rates more than *double* the state average."

The report also details the benefits of ESAs for Native Americans, who make use of the program at the highest rate of any demographic. "In contrast to the public school spending amounts that reach up to \$16,000 per pupil," the report states, "the average (non-kindergarten, non-special needs) ESA award for students from Native American reservations totaled just \$6,219 in FY 2019, meaning they cost up to \$10,000 *less* per student per year than the surrounding public school systems. Yet even at this substantially lower cost, ESAs provide enough funding to cover up to 100% of tuition costs at nearby private schools, providing students opportunity where often none existed before."

Additionally, education choice programs benefit public school students and taxpayers by increasing competition, decreasing segregation, and improving civic values and practices. Research also shows students at private schools are less likely than their public school peers to experience problems such as alcohol abuse, bullying, drug use, fighting, gang activity, racial tension, theft, vandalism, and weapon-based threats. There is also a strong causal link suggesting private school choice programs improve the mental health of participating students.

An annual survey by Phi Delta Kappa reveals more than one-third of American parents fear for their child's safety at school. This number rises to 48 percent for parents earning less than \$50,000 per year. This represents a large jump from 2013, when only 12 percent of respondents answered they feared for their child's safety.

The Arizona public education system's failure to protect children and provide parents with reasonable alternatives is precisely why this expansion of the Empowerment Scholarships Account program is so desperately needed. Every Arizona family should have the opportunity to remove their child from an unsafe school environment if need be, and expanding ESA could help that become the reality.

The following documents provide more information about education choice programs.

Education Savings Account Serving Low-Income Communities: The Impact of ESAs in Arizona, Part II

https://goldwaterinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Education-Savings-Accounts-Serving-Low-Income-Communities_web-1.pdf

This report by the Goldwater Institute and American Federation for Children captures the extraordinary impact of the Empowerment Scholarship Account (ESA) program among Arizona families most in need. The report shows that ESAs put private education within financial reach of even the most economically disadvantaged and turns upside down prior claims that ESAs disproportionately benefit wealthy communities.

The Public School Benefits of Education Savings Accounts: The Impact of ESAs in Arizona

https://goldwaterinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Public-School-Benefits-of-ESAs_web.pdf

This report from the Goldwater Institute illustrates how the state's education savings account (ESA) program, Empowerment Scholarship Accounts, are good news for Arizona students and their families, Arizona taxpayers, and Arizona public schools. The report finds ESAs provide a customized education to high-need students, giving them more opportunity to succeed, save taxpayers thousands of dollars per enrolled child, and financially benefit K-12 public schools.

Families' Experiences on the New Frontier of Educational Choice: Findings from a Survey of K-12 Parents in Arizona

<https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2019-4-Arizona-Parent-Survey-by-Andrew-Catt-and-Albert-Chang.pdf>

Arizona has one of the most robust, diverse school choice environments in the nation, featuring charter schools, a tax-credit scholarship (TCS) program and education savings accounts (ESAs).

This EdChoice report surveys approximately 3,500 parents across all educational sectors to learn more about their school climate, satisfaction, levels of parental involvement, schooling preferences, and trusted sources for educational decisions.

Exploring Arizona's Private Education Sector

<https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Exploring-Arizonas-Private-Education-Sector-by-Andrew-D-Catt.pdf>

This EdChoice report surveys Arizona private school leaders about the state's educational choice programs, especially its Empowerment Scholarship Accounts, as well as their schools' enrollment capacity, tuition rates, student demographics, and more. This report brings together those results along with U.S. Department of Education data to paint a detailed picture of Arizona's private education sector.

The Education Debit Card II: What Arizona Parents Purchase with Education Savings Accounts

<http://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/2016-2-The-Education-Debit-Card-II-WEB-1.pdf>

This EdChoice follow-up study examines more data from Arizona's Empowerment Scholarship Account program. The program allows families to spend their education dollars on a variety of options, including private tutoring, learning therapies, and more. The report reveals ESA families' expenditures now and how spending trends have changed since their last report.

Fiscal Effects of School Choice

<https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Fiscal-Effects-of-School-Choice-Condensed.pdf>

This EdChoice analysis of 40 private educational choice programs in 19 states plus D.C. summarizes the facts and evidence on the fiscal effects of educational choice programs across the United States and finds they have provided up to \$28.3 billion in net fiscal savings to state and local taxpayers through Fiscal Year 2018. The programs in the analysis include three education savings accounts programs (ESAs), 19 school voucher programs, and 18 tax-credit scholarship programs.

The 123s of School Choice (2020 Edition)

<https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/123s-of-School-Choice-2020-4.pdf>

This report from EdChoice is an in-depth review of the available research on private school choice programs in America. Areas of study include: private school choice program participant test scores, program participant attainment, parent satisfaction, public school students' test scores, civic values and practices, racial/ethnic integration and fiscal effects.

A Win-Win Solution: The Empirical Evidence on School Choice (Fourth Edition)

<http://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/A-Win-Win-Solution-The-Empirical-Evidence-on-School-Choice.pdf>

This paper by EdChoice details how a vast body of research shows educational choice programs improve academic outcomes for students and schools, saves taxpayers money, reduces segregation in schools, and improves students' civic values. This edition brings together a total of 100 empirical studies examining these essential questions in one comprehensive report.

The Public Benefit of Private Schooling: Test Scores Rise When There Is More of It

<https://object.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/pa830.pdf>

This *Policy Analysis* from the Cato Institute examines the effect increased access to private schooling has had on international student test scores in 52 countries. The Cato researchers found that a 1 percentage point increase in the share of private school enrollment would lead to moderate increases in students' math, reading, and science achievement.

The Effects of School Choice on Mental Health

https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3272550

This study from Corey DeAngelis at the Cato Institute and Angela K. Dills of Western Carolina University empirically examines the relationship between school choice and mental health. It finds that states adopting broad-based voucher programs and charter schools witness declines in adolescent suicides and suggests that private schooling reduces the number of times individuals are seen for mental health issues.

Child Safety Accounts: Protecting Our Children through Parental Freedom

<https://www.heartland.org/template-assets/documents/publications/CSAccountsPB.pdf>

In this *Heartland Policy Brief*, Vicki Alger, senior fellow at the Independent Women's Forum and research fellow at the Independent Institute, and Heartland Policy Analyst Tim Benson detail the prevalence of bullying, harassment, and assault taking place in America's public schools and the difficulties for parents in having their child moved from a school that is unsafe for them. Alger and Benson propose a Child Safety Account program, which would allow parents to immediately have their child moved to a safe school – private, parochial, or public – as soon as parents feel the public school their child is currently attending is too dangerous to their child's physical or emotional health.