



RESEARCH & COMMENTARY: UNIVERSAL ESA PROGRAM WOULD BE GAME-CHANGER FOR PEACH STATE FAMILIES

By Tim Benson
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Program Would Be Open To All Georgia Children

Legislation in the Georgia House of Representatives would create a universal education savings account (ESA) program open to all Georgia children. If passed, the ESAs would be available to any Georgia family to pay for tuition and fees for their children at private and parochial schools. The funds could also be used to pay for textbooks, tutoring services, transportation costs, computers and other approved hardware, dual-enrollment courses, and educational therapies and services. The accounts would be funded at \$6,000 per school year.

A study from the Georgia Public Policy Foundation, released in January 2021, found that an universal ESA program serving just 5 percent of Georgia’s student population would result in roughly \$1.7 billion “in economic benefits from higher lifetime earnings associated with increases in academic achievement,” at least \$1 billion in economic benefits “associated with additional high school graduates [throughout the state],” and \$13 million in economic benefits via reductions in crime through “competitive pressures to improve behavioral outcomes, improvements in discipline policies, and by providing access to cultures and peer groups that discourage risky behaviors.”

Further, the proposed ESA program would also likely save Peach State taxpayers money, as a 2021 analysis from EdChoice found two other education choice programs—the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship Program and the Qualified Education Expense Tax Credit—have saved Georgia taxpayers between \$605 million and \$1.1 billion through Fiscal Year 2018. This works out to a savings of between \$4,355 and \$8,013 per each student participating in these programs.

Because of the age of all these programs, the report notes that the “fiscal effects are likely closer to the upper bound estimate.”

“The results from this fiscal analysis should not be surprising given that educational choice programs are funded at a significantly lower public expense than public school systems,” the analysis concludes. “While educational choice programs enroll just 2.3 percent of publicly funded K-12 students overall, these programs receive just 1.0 percent of total public spending. These basic facts provide important context for evaluating arguments that private educational choice programs harm students who remain in district schools. Given this context, it is difficult to see how expanding educational opportunities for families via educational choice programs could harm public school systems fiscally. To be sure, many studies have examined educational choice programs’ effects on students enrolling in nearby public schools. Nearly all find that students who remain in district schools experience modest and positive gains in learning. Contrary to claims that students in district schools are harmed by increasing educational choice, the evidence suggests otherwise.”

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. Additionally, these 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.

It is probably these dismal results, and also because teacher unions have repeatedly played politics with school closings during the COVID-19 pandemic in direct conflict with students’ best interests, that education choice programs like ESAs are more popular with parents than ever before. Polling by EdChoice released in September 2021 found 78 percent support for ESAs, for example, among the general public and 84 percent among current school parents.^[12] These findings are mirrored in the American Federation for Children’s seventh-annual National School Choice Poll, released in January 2021, which found 78 percent support for ESA programs.

The goal of public education in Georgia today and in the years to come should be to allow all parents to choose which schools their children attend, require every school to compete for every student who walks through its doors, and make sure every child has the opportunity to attend a quality school. Establishing a universal ESA program is a logical step forward in meeting that goal. There has not been a time when providing these opportunities has been more urgent and more needed than right now.

The following documents provide more information about education choice programs.

Funding Students Instead of Institutions: The Economic Impacts of Universal Education Savings Accounts in Georgia

<https://seureservercdn.net/198.71.233.138/m01.813.myftupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/DeAngelis-Funding-Students-Instead-of-Institutions-Final.pdf>

This study from the Georgia Public Policy Foundation finds education savings accounts could increase Georgia's graduation rates and workers' lifetime earnings as well as reduce crime and its related costs.

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.