

Politics and money swirl around Tennessee educational savings accounts

George Korda

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There's a concern among some in Tennessee that children from poor families attending lesser-performing or failing schools might be able, using public dollars, to attend a better school.

Gov. Bill Lee's Tennessee education savings account (ESA) pilot program passed the legislature last year, and Lee signed it into law. The ESA would afford poorer families in Davidson County and Shelby County an opportunity to do what they can't financially afford, to send their kids to go to a private school for a shot at getting an improved education.

The ESA pilot effort was derailed, perhaps temporarily, when Davidson County Chancellor Anne C. Martin ruled on May 4 that the ESA violates the "Home Rule" amendment to the state constitution in that it applies only to two counties and doesn't have local approval.

Several days later the chancellor told the state not to take applications for the ESA while the program is enjoined.

A sentence in an Associated Press story on the judge's no sign-up directive may explain the need for the pilot program, and the reasons for Davidson's and Shelby's vocal opposition; both are revealed in the last 13 words of this sentence: "According to the law, the voucher program would only apply to Nashville and Shelby County, which includes Memphis, *the areas with the lowest performing schools and regions with Democratic political strongholds.*"

However, it's not as if all Democrats, among them high-profile national leaders, are averse to their children attending private schools. Among public school advocates who sent their children to public schools are former President Barack Obama and his wife, Michelle, and former Democratic presidential candidates Sen. Elizabeth Warren and Sen. Kamala Harris.

When the Cato Institute – a libertarian Washington, D.C. think-tank – asked Sen. Bernie Sanders, another former Democratic presidential candidate, if he sent his children to public or private schools, Cato received no answer.

They have a right to make such choices for their kids. And the financial means to do so.

Poor people don't have the options available to people with greater resources. The ESA is supposed to level that field a bit.

The ESA program made families eligible, if they qualified, for up to \$7,300 in public funds a year to be used for private schools and other approved educational expenses. The program would

be capped at 15,000 students, about eight percent of the nearly 190,000 students in the Shelby and Davidson County school systems.

The basic arguments are always the same. On one side it's said that public education and students will be harmed if public funds, instead of going exclusively to public schools, are provided to lower-income families to send their kids to private schools.

The other side is that children are being harmed now and in the future by being sentenced, in effect, to sub-performing public schools.

Data on the Public Schools Review website showing the performance of Davidson and Shelby County schools in math and reading may be why lower-income families might like an alternative. The website describes the Davidson County Public School District as having an average math proficiency score of 30% and a reading proficiency score of 29%. Memphis public schools show math proficiency scores of 20% percent and reading proficiency of 21%.

Another example, from the Tennessean on Aug. 16, 2018: "TNReady scores: Nashville public schools math and English scores decline at almost every high school." Seventeen Davidson County high schools "didn't have high enough math proficiency rates to be reported by the state."

It can be incessantly argued that children will be "harmed" in either the pilot program or non-pilot program scenarios. While the arguing continues, the grim educational statistics are bystanders. The numbers being what they are, why the virulent opposition to trying even a pilot program?

Does a combination of politics and money mean that there's fear the program won't work, or that it will?