



RESEARCH & COMMENTARY: SOUTH CAROLINA FAMILIES DESERVE EDUCATION SAVINGS ACCOUNTS

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January 30, 2020

Companion legislation in the South Carolina Legislature would establish Equal Opportunity Education Scholarship Accounts, an education savings account (ESA) for low-income students and students with special needs.

With an ESA, state education funds allocated for a child are placed in a parent-controlled savings account. Under the proposed program, parents could use a state-provided, restricted-use debit card to access education funds to pay for resources for their child's unique educational program. The ESAs could be used to pay for tuition and fees at private and parochial schools, textbooks and curriculum materials, online courses, tutoring services, educational therapies, computer hardware, or transportation costs. They could also be used to cover the fees required to take national standardized achievement tests, such as the SAT or ACT, as well as tuition, fees, and textbooks at postsecondary institutions.

The program would also be available to special-needs and low-income children, children in foster care, and the children of active-duty military personnel, including members of the National Guard and Reserve. Funding for each account would equal South Carolina's per-pupil funding for the school district in which the student is transferring out of. The program would be available to 5 percent of eligible students in 2019–20, 10 percent of eligible students in 2020–21, and all eligible students in 2021–22.

A February 2018 survey of South Carolina private schools by EdChoice found these schools potentially have 20,000 open seats available across grades K–12, and 64 percent of the schools surveyed said they would likely participate in a universal ESA program, while 58 percent said they would be willing to participate in the Equal Opportunity Education Scholarship Account program. Only 5 percent of schools said they would not participate in an ESA program. However, there is still large room for growth in the number of schools that would participate in

an ESA program, as just over half responded they were “not familiar” or “not too familiar” with ESAs.

Copious empirical research on ESAs and other school choice programs finds these programs offer families improved access to high-quality schools that meet their children’s unique needs and circumstances. Moreover, these programs improve access to schools that deliver quality education inexpensively. Additionally, they benefit public school students and taxpayers by increasing competition, decreasing segregation, and improving civic values and practices.

Students at private schools are also 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 such as ESAs improve the mental health of participating students.

It is probably for these reasons that ESAs are more popular with parents than ever before. The results of EdChoice’s sixth annual “Schooling in America” survey, released in December 2018, found 74 percent of respondents favor ESAs, up 3 percentage points from 2017. According to the survey, support for ESAs is 76 percent among millennials, 72 percent for those with incomes less than \$40,000 a year, 79 percent for blacks, 70 percent for Hispanics, 72 percent among self-identified Democrats, and 77 percent among independents.

These results are mirrored in the American Federation for Children’s latest annual National School Choice Poll, just released in January 2020, which shows 80 percent support for ESA programs from likely voters in the 2020 election.

The school a child attends should not be determined solely by his or her ZIP code. However, this is currently the case for most South Carolina children. The goal of public education in the Palmetto State 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.

The following documents provide more information on education savings accounts and parental choice in education.

Exploring South Carolina’s Private Education Sector

<https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Exploring-South-Carolinas-Private-Education-Sector-by-Andrew-Catt-and-Michael-Shaw.pdf>

This is the ninth entry in EdChoice’s *School Survey Series*. This brief synthesizes information about South Carolina’s private schools from a survey conducted by EdChoice. The survey looks at South Carolina private schools’ open seats, tuition and fees, regulatory concerns, and interest in school choice programs.

The 123s of School Choice

<https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/123s-of-School-Choice.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.

Education Savings Accounts: The Future of School Choice Has Arrived

<https://www.heartland.org/publications-resources/publications/education-savings-accounts-the-future-of-school-choice-has-arrived>

In this *Heartland Policy Brief*, Policy Analyst Tim Benson discusses how universal ESA programs offer the most comprehensive range of educational choices to parents; describes the six ESA programs currently in operation; and reviews possible state-level constitutional challenges to ESA programs.

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.

2018 Schooling in America Survey: Public Opinion on K–12 Education, Parent and Teacher Experiences, Accountability, and School Choice

<https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/2018-12-Schooling-In-America-by-Paul-DiPerna-and-Michael-Shaw.pdf>

This annual survey from EdChoice, conducted in partnership with Braun Research, Inc., measures public opinion and awareness on a range of K–12 education topics, including parents' schooling preferences, educational choice policies, and the federal government's role in education. The survey also records response levels, differences, and intensities for citizens located across the country and in a variety of demographic groups.

Protecting Students with Child Safety Accounts

<https://www.heartland.org/publications-resources/publications/protecting-students-with-child-safety-accounts>

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.

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.

Competition: For the Children

<https://www.heartland.org/publications-resources/publications/competition-for-the-children>

This study from the Texas Public Policy Foundation claims universal school choice results in higher test scores for students remaining in traditional public schools and improved high school graduation rates.

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.

Fiscal Effects of School Vouchers: Examining the Savings and Costs of America's Private School Voucher Programs

<https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Fiscal-Effects-of-School-Vouchers-by-Martin-Lueken.pdf>

In this EdChoice study, Director of Fiscal Policy and Analysis Martin F. Lueken examined the fiscal impact of voucher programs across America—from their inception through fiscal year 2015—to determine whether they generated costs or savings for state and local taxpayers.

Lueken found these programs generated cumulative net savings to state and local budgets of \$3.2 billion. This represents a \$3,400 savings per voucher recipient.