Mississippi parents are not backing down as they travel the state and speak in support of ESAs

Two-Minute Talk
The Goldwater Institute’s Jonathan Butcher addresses the legal challenges to, and support for, Arizona’s ESAs
Breaking the ice for a growing school choice plan to bloom

Many Americans view the public schools to which they are assigned similarly to this winter’s polar vortex: frustratingly inescapable. Thanks to some policymakers, however, a path is being cleared for those families to spring forward to more suitable environments.

As this edition of “The School Choice Advocate” shows, education savings accounts (ESAs) are gaining momentum across the country. Following their creation in Arizona three years ago, ESAs became a considered policy in Florida and Ohio, both established school choice states. In 2013, Montana lawmakers introduced their own ESA plan.

Meanwhile, each subsequent year since Arizona’s enactment of ESAs, lawmakers have expanded the program to include more families. They are looking to do so again this year.

Indeed, 2014 has been an encouraging year for ESAs. So far, ESAs have been introduced in Florida, Iowa, Kansas, Mississippi, and Oklahoma. (Montana’s legislature does not meet this year.)

Although some proposals are stronger than others—and one already has failed to clear a committee vote (Iowa)—the fact this new policy is being considered proves lawmakers see ESAs as “The Way of the Future” in education, as coined by the Friedman Foundation’s introductory paper on ESAs.

But even the spring season can have its occasional rainfall. In Arizona, as Jonathan Butcher points out in this edition’s “Two-Minute Talk,” legal challenges from the unions and school boards have served as an unnecessary distraction from the ESA program’s encouraging results.

In Mississippi, as parents take the lead on pushing for the state to adopt ESAs—detailed in this publication’s “In the States” story—some are attempting to stymie the program with their usual tricks: calling the policy “a voucher plan,” claiming it “drains funding” from public schools, and saying choice actually “disenfranchises parents” because private schools and education service providers are “unaccountable.”

Such tactics show that, although ESAs may be a dramatically different policy than vouchers, tax-credit scholarships, and personal tax credits and deductions, those opposed to giving parents more educational options will stop at nothing. That is why those hoping to advance ESAs need information on how the policy works, stories from those using ESAs, and facts on whether ESAs are actually making a difference—all available in this spring edition of “The School Choice Advocate.”

Education savings accounts are providing rays of opportunity to Arizona children. It’s up to school choice supporters to make more states see the light.
ESAs give mother and son new opportunity

For the first six years of his life, Amanda didn’t hear much from her son, Nathan. But when he was able to access a private school and receive tutoring services from a specialized provider, that all changed. Those opportunities would not have been possible without Nathan’s education savings account (ESA).

Nathan has autism and struggles with a significant speech delay. For him, a large classroom made it difficult to focus and interact.

Amanda initially enrolled Nathan in a developmental preschool, after which he spent one year in kindergarten at public school. Unfortunately, Nathan was not getting the education Amanda thought he needed. Then came the ESA.

Today Nathan attends Lauren’s Institute for Education, a private school that specializes in helping students diagnosed with autism. Nathan is speaking in full sentences and enjoys the subjects of science and social studies.

“It’s wonderful to finally be able to communicate with my son,” Amanda said. “I wouldn’t have been able to send him to Lauren’s Institute if it weren’t for the education savings account. It’s provided him the environment that he really needs to succeed.”

At Lauren’s Institute for Education, students are grouped by age and development. Nathan is one of just five students in his class.

“As much as he enjoyed [public school], he wasn’t learning anything…. Two years ago we weren’t even sure if we were ever going to have a conversation with him…. The only reason this (improvement) is possible is because we could find programs that meet his needs with ESA funds.”

Moving, defending, and celebrating school choice

Idaho – Robbie Rhinesmith testified on a House bill creating tax-credit scholarships, which would be that region’s first private school choice program. The measure later passed the House and is under review in the Senate.

Indiana – Robert Enlow appeared in the Indy Star calling for the state to expand its voucher program to all families.

Iowa – Michael Chartier spoke at Iowa’s state capitol as part of a school choice celebration in lead up to that state’s legislative session.


Tennessee – Stephanie Linn spoke to the Knoxville Chamber of Commerce on school vouchers and appeared on the Hallerin Hilton radio show.

Texas – The Friedman Foundation helped kick off National School Choice Week with an op-
ed in the Houston Chronicle, arguing that school choice is far more effective at reducing income inequality than President Obama’s proposals.

National – The Friedman Foundation published an op-ed at National Review Online with the Heritage Foundation, Cato Institute, Heartland Institute, Center for Education Reform, and the Hoover Institution’s Herbert J. Walberg opposing efforts to impose Common Core and accompanied state tests on school choice programs. The article, “Choosing to Learn,” can be found at edchoice.org/Columns

Foundation President and CEO Robert Enlow debated author Diane Ravitch on school choice in front of an audience of 2,000 (chiefly educators) in Indianapolis. Photo taken by Scott Elliott, Chalkbeat Indiana, http://in.chalkbeat.org/2014/03/01/ravitch-tangles-with-school-reformers-on-butler-panel/
Education savings accounts (ESAs) allow parents to withdraw their children from public district or charter schools and receive a deposit of public funds into government-authorized savings accounts, which they can access through a debit card with restricted, but multiple, uses. Those funds can cover many schooling options, including private school tuition, educational therapies, online learning programs, homeschool curriculum, tutoring, and even future college expenses.

Arizona is the first state to provide ESAs. The majority of users are students with special needs, the first K-12 population to qualify for ESAs. Today, children from foster care, military families, in kindergarten, and those assigned to underperforming public schools are also eligible. In our report examining ESA families’ expenditure data, we found that about two-thirds of families use their ESAs to select one educational option, whereas the rest customize their children’s education with multiple educational tools:

- Private School Tuition: 85.3%
- Therapy: 7.12%
- Fees: 0.94%
- Standardized Tests: 0.01%
- Online Courses: 0.05%
- Tutoring: 4.2%
- Required Textbooks: 0.08%

For more details on ESAs, their constitutionality, and whether they should be universally available, visit edchoice.org/ESAs

For more info on ESA parents’ spending habits, including how much funds they’re saving, visit edchoice.org/EdDebitCard
We surveyed Arizona’s ESA parents to determine their demographics, satisfaction levels, and feedback for improving the program. Below are key findings on who’s using ESAs and whether they are content with the program.

In late March, the Arizona Supreme Court declined to review a lower court’s decision upholding the state’s ESAs, essentially deeming the program legal. The ruling could prompt Arizona policymakers to expand ESAs further and encourage other states to consider the innovative education policy. This year, several states have considered ESAs legislatively with Mississippi being the closest to actually enacting a program (see next page for more details). For real-time legislative updates on Arizona’s and other states’ progress on ESAs and other school choice measures, follow the Friedman Foundation on Twitter @edchoice.

To learn what services ESA parents want more of, if extra funds were available, visit edchoice.org/SchoolingSatisfaction

Track and promote ESAs in your state.

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edchoice.org
Mississippi parents of children with special needs drive ESA legislation

As the mother of a child with special needs, Carolyn Crawford knows how important a specialized education can be. As a member of Mississippi’s House of Representatives, she also knows her state is not providing it to many students in need. Parents statewide are stepping forward in agreement.

This year, Mississippi has become the most-watched state among school choice supporters because of the Equal Opportunity for Students with Special Needs Act. The legislation, sponsored by Rep. Crawford and Sen. Nancy Collins, would provide education savings accounts (ESAs) to students with special needs, making it the first state to pass such legislation outside Arizona.

As an indicator of Mississippi’s performance when it comes to educating children with special needs, the state has an appalling 23 percent graduation rate among that population of students. Crawford and Collins knew action had to be taken.

Momentum for the Equal Opportunity Act started when Sen. Collins’ version of the legislation passed the full Senate Feb. 13, a date by which general bills must move or die for the session. Although the House of Representatives did not need to move the legislation that same day—because the Senate version was acted upon—members did anyway. Late Feb. 13, Rep. Crawford’s bill also passed her respective chamber.


Flanked by more than 20 parents and students—most of whom were from public schools—Rep. Crawford and Sen. Collins explained the intent of the legislation and introduced the parents who provided their personal experiences on what ESAs could do for students with special needs.

One such family was Katie and John McCustion, whose son, Ian, has dyslexia. The McCustions testified during the joint committee meeting on how a $6,000 ESA would help them give seven-year-old Ian the educational services his disability requires.

To show just how impactful the Equal Opportunity Act would be, Ken Bartosek spoke at the press conference in support of the legislation, even though his child with special needs already has graduated from private school. Bartosek told reporters how a more individualized education helped his son reach Mississippi State University. He was confident ESAs could do the same for more families.

Those stories prompted Mississippi lawmakers to move the legislation further. But, because of complexities in the Equal Opportunity Act’s language, the bill faces a complicated path in the legislature. The House version passed a critical hurdle by clearing a full Senate vote March 12. Once that version then passes a conference committee comprising House and Senate members, it will be voted on again by the House and Senate. Should that happen, supporters expect Gov. Phil Bryant will sign the ESA plan into law.

For school choice supporters, that enactment could be a watershed moment for ESAs, proving the popular Arizona model is doable and desirable in other states. More important, adoption of the Equal Opportunity for Students with Special Needs Act would give Mississippi parents that for which they have been very vocal over the past few months: the choice to customize a better education for their children.
What’s the status of the legal challenge to Arizona’s ESAs?

Two courts, the Maricopa County Superior Court and the Arizona Court of Appeals, have upheld the ESAs. In a unanimous decision from the Court of Appeals, Judge Jon W. Thompson wrote, “The specified object of the ESA is the beneficiary families, not private or sectarian schools. Parents can use the funds deposited in the empowerment account to customize an education that meets their children's unique educational needs.” The Arizona Supreme Court decided in March not to review the Court of Appeals’ ruling, essentially deeming the program legal.

Have ESAs garnered support from any unlikely groups?

Last year, Democratic Sen. Barbara McGuire voted in favor of expanding the accounts to incoming kindergarten students and increasing the base award for each account, which was critical support from an unlikely source. Today, the Goldwater Institute is working with foster care agencies across the state to help children find stable educational settings through the ESAs. And parents are responding. Education savings accounts are helping children in military families this year, as well as adopted children and students from failing schools.

What’s next for Arizona’s ESA program?

Every child can attend a traditional school, and almost every child in Arizona has access to a public charter school. Likewise, every student should be able to use an ESA to prepare for the challenges of the 21st century, inside and outside the classroom. ESAs give parents and their children the flexibility to meet specific learning needs, focus on an area of interest, work at their own pace, and pursue challenging subject material. Every parent wants their child to succeed, and the ESAs help students create an educational experience as unique as they are.

Jonathan Butcher is a member of the Friedman Foundation’s Speakers Bureau.
To request Jonathan for one of your events, visit edchoice.org/SpeakersBureau

Charting different courses for America’s private schools

As efforts to enact ESAs increase across the country—as does work to grow existing school choice programs—private schools should take notice. The scope of their existence hinges on parents’ freedom to choose.

For Milton Friedman, his interest in private schools was two-fold: “further the education” existing private schools already provide and welcome “educational entrepreneurs and their financial backers” into the field to grow new schools modeled for the 21st century.

Private schools have long been at a disadvantage in the K-12 landscape, as they have to compete with a “free” product: government’s traditional and chartered public schools. And as the economy and family incomes continue to stagnate, private schools’ ability to meet Milton’s wish is hindered even further.

But two reports to be released by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice this spring suggest private schools can adapt—and, in fact, are doing so already. It’s up to the schools to determine what policies best match their current needs and future plans.

The first study, by the American Enterprise Institute’s Andrew P. Kelly and Michael Q. McShane, analyzes why private Catholic schools in three major metro areas converted to public charter schools. The authors caution that “as more communities consider school choice (both public and private)...it is important to emphasize that how those programs are structured affects the schools that will be able to participate—and ultimately the set of choices available to families.”

The second Friedman report, by Bellwether Education’s Andrew Smarick, offers ways private schools can learn from the charter school sector—specifically, charters’ multi-school networks, incubator programs, and authorizing models. It is Smarick’s hope that “[b]ackers of choice programs...replicate chartering’s greatest successes and avoid its most notable missteps.”

Indeed, walking through America’s changing educational terrain can be challenging. Both reports could be indispensable for private schools in need of a guide.

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