

**House Education Committee Public Hearing**  
**ESAs for Students with Special Needs**

McKenzie Snow, Policy Analyst, Foundation for Excellence in Education  
September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2016

Good morning and thank you for the opportunity to talk with you today, with special thanks to Chairman Saylor and his team for facilitating this hearing and to Representative Ward for her leadership on this policy. I'm McKenzie Snow, a Policy Analyst at the Foundation for Excellence in Education (ExcelinEd). ExcelinEd is a national, bipartisan non-profit that advocates for state education reforms that help students maximize their potential.

I was invited to speak to you about Education Savings Accounts, also known as Education Scholarship Accounts (ESAs), which are accounts that parents can use to pay for state-approved education expenses to create an educational experience customized for their child. Parents know what their children need to be successful in school, and they are motivated to find the best educational fit. There is no one best school for every child; however, there is a best school for your individual child. A blended learning model may work best for your tech-savvy daughter, while your son may thrive in an educational environment that looks exactly like the school his grandparents attended. These are just innate differences in how children—unique, individual human beings—learn. The importance of educational fit is intensified when children have special needs.

Children's unique needs are reflected in how their parents prioritize different components of education. EdChoice, another non-profit working in education reform, has an extensive library of research on this topic.<sup>1</sup> When EdChoice asked parents of educational choice students in multiple states to list their top reasons for choosing their child's school, their answers show the diversity of educational preferences. Varying from student discipline and safety to learning environment and smaller classes, responses reflect what parents know their children need most.

ESAs empower parents to act on their preferences, utilizing their deep understanding of their children—an understanding that even experts and decision makers just couldn't have. ESA programs allow parents of participating students to use an account of public funds to cover the cost of their child's unique needs, including private school tuition, online education, homeschooling, tutoring, therapies, and savings for future educational expenses. With the ability to customize the best possible education for their unique student, parents' creativity and love for their children are unleashed. Furthermore, the incentive to maximize the utility of ESA funds motivates parents to get the most bang for their educational buck.

ESAs were first established in Arizona in 2011, followed by Florida in 2014, and Mississippi, Tennessee, and Nevada in 2015. When looking at these programs, five major considerations arise: eligibility, funding, account structure, administration, and accountability. The chart I've provided below gives a summary of how different states approach each of these topics.

If an ESA program for all students with special needs were enacted in Pennsylvania, 276,185 students with special needs would be eligible – or 15.9 percent of students statewide in 2015-16.<sup>2</sup> Yet, ESA programs in other states show us that only a small proportion of the eligible students—those who cannot find the right educational fit in a public school environment—participate.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.edchoice.org/what-we-do/research/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://penndata.hbg.psu.edu/penndata/documents/BSEReports/Data%20Preview/2015\\_2016/PDF\\_Documents/Speced\\_Quick\\_Report\\_State\\_Final.pdf](https://penndata.hbg.psu.edu/penndata/documents/BSEReports/Data%20Preview/2015_2016/PDF_Documents/Speced_Quick_Report_State_Final.pdf)

According to EdChoice's estimates, Arizona's ESA program has 253,228 eligible students or 22 percent of students eligible statewide. At the start of this school year, 2,909 students—or just 1 percent of eligible students—were participating. In Florida, about 2 percent of eligible students participate.<sup>3</sup> To be clear, there will not be, nor has there been, a mass exodus from the public school system. If you are in a public school that is serving your child well, why would you uproot them to put them into an entirely different setting? These programs are for the parents who desperately need something different.

So far, I've focused on the theory and structure of ESA programs. Now, I'd like to tell you about a couple of remarkable children with special needs who have benefitted from ESAs in Arizona and Florida and discuss how their parents are using these accounts.

Faith Kleffel is a participant in Florida's ESA program, which is called the Gardiner Scholarship program. Faith's mom, Julie, enrolled her in a public special education pre-school. When the class doubled in size, teachers were unable to give Faith, who has Down Syndrome, the individual attention she needed. Julie said, "I mean no disrespect to the teacher, but she was just overwhelmed and Faith was regressing."<sup>4</sup> Julie enrolled Faith in the Gardiner Scholarship program and now uses that account to pay for a tutor, a curriculum that allows her to instruct at home, special shoe inserts that help Faith with her balance, and speech and occupational therapies. These are vital educational services Julie otherwise could not afford. When Faith was born, her doctor was unsure if she would ever be able to sit up by herself. With the progression she's made through opportunities afforded to her by the Gardiner Scholarship, which Julie describes as a life changer and saver, Faith can now walk three miles, speak in full sentences and interact in groups.

Elias Hines is a recipient of Arizona's ESA, called the Empowerment Scholarship Account. If you talk to advocates or doctors, they'll tell you autism affects children in so many different ways. In Elias's case, he is very gifted in some areas, while developmentally behind in others. For example, he has behavioral issues and trouble expressing himself, which oftentimes culminated in meltdowns at school. Yet, he also taught himself to play Tchaikovsky on piano by ear. Elias attended public schools in Arizona until age six when he was placed in an all-autistic first grade class in which he regressed, prompting his mother, Holland, to withdraw him. When Elias first enrolled in the ESA program, Holland explored private school options. Elias went back-and-forth between private school and homeschooling supplemented by tutors until she found the right educational fit for his unique needs.

Elias now attends AZ Aspire Academy, which specializes in the education of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders and anxiety, among other special needs. At Aspire, Elias's education is overseen by a Certified Master Teacher. He receives two hours of one-on-one instruction each day and group classes to develop social skills. With an ESA, Holland also is able to afford music lessons, nurturing one of Elias's great talents. Holland said, "Elias is finally able to complete an entire week at school without me being called to pick him up, without any meltdowns—and with more academic and behavioral progress than we have seen in his entire life."<sup>5</sup>

These stories are just a snapshot of what ESA programs have done for students with special needs in other states. Even though their designated public school wasn't the best fit their unique learning needs, students like Faith and Elias deserve the opportunity to reach the fullness of their potential, and parents like Julie and Holland deserve to be empowered and trusted with the resources and flexibility ESAs provide.

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/school-choice-in-america/>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Finley\\_education\\_savings\\_accounts\\_conference.pdf](https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Finley_education_savings_accounts_conference.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Finley\\_education\\_savings\\_accounts\\_conference.pdf](https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Finley_education_savings_accounts_conference.pdf)

## ESA Policies by State

	<b>Arizona (2011)</b> Empowerment Scholarship Accounts	<b>Florida (2014)</b> Gardiner Scholarships	<b>Mississippi (2015)</b> Education Scholarship Accounts	<b>Tennessee (2015)</b> Individualized Education Accounts	<b>Nevada (2015)</b> Education Savings Accounts
<b>Enrolled (est.)</b>	4,000	5,000	450	N/A	N/A (8k apps)
<b>Student Eligibility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Special needs</li> <li>• Failing schools</li> <li>• Military families</li> <li>• Foster care</li> <li>• N.A. Reservation</li> <li>• Siblings</li> </ul>	Certain disabilities	Special needs (IEP) 500 new slots each year.	Certain disabilities	Near-Universal
<b>Prior Public</b>	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Funding Source</b>	Formula	Appropriation	Appropriation	Formula	Formula
<b>Per-Student Amount</b>	90% of charter funding + weights	\$10,000* State, weights + local	\$6,500	\$6,628*	\$5,200 - \$5,700
<b>Administrator</b>	Dept. of Education	Non-profits	Dept. of Education	Dept. of Education	Treasury
<b>Account Structure</b>	Debit card	Reimbursement, Preapproval	Reimbursement	Debit card	Hybrid (online, reimburse)