

States weigh turning education funds over to parents: a radical idea is catching fire across the country STEPHANIE SIMON 2/6/2015

Reviewed in refute-vision by Jason Bedrick, Jonathan Butcher and Greg Forster

A radical new concept in school choice will come up for vote in at least a half-dozen states from Virginia to Oklahoma in the coming months, as lawmakers consider giving hundreds of thousands of parents the freedom to design a custom education for their children — at taxpayer expense. Twenty-one states already subsidize tuition at private schools through vouchers or tax credits. The new programs promise far more flexibility, but critics fear they could also lead to waste or abuse as taxpayers underwrite do-it-yourself educations with few quality controls. Called Education Savings Accounts, the programs work like this: The state deposits the funds it would have spent educating a given child in public schools into a bank account controlled by his parents. The parents can use those funds — the amount ranges from \$5,000 to more than \$30,000 a year — to pay for personal tutors, homeschooling workbooks, online classes, sports team fees and many types of therapy, including horseback riding lessons for children with disabilities. They can also spend the money on private school tuition or save some of it for college.

ESAs so far exist only in Arizona and Florida, where one family recently sought to use their child's funds on an "educational vacation" to Europe. (Program administrators, who must approve all expenditures, said no.) But the idea is catching fire. Bills to create the accounts cleared panels last week in the Virginia and Mississippi legislatures. They're likely to be on the table as well this session in Iowa, Nebraska, Nevada, Oklahoma, Texas and possibly Rhode Island and Tennessee. The Foundation for Excellence in Education, founded by former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, published a report this week touting ESAs as a promising way to shake up public education. "We need our policymakers to be much more daring," the report urged. Tennessee state Rep. John DeBerry Jr., a Democrat, couldn't agree more: "We created public education. It didn't fall from the sky. It wasn't divinely given to us. We created it, so we can reform it," he said. "If the status quo isn't working, it needs to be changed." Tennessee lawmakers have considered and rejected vouchers in the past, but the November elections brought in new advocates of school choice, and DeBerry is optimistic he can get education savings accounts, vouchers or tax credit scholarships passed this session.

The ultimate in local control

The interest in ESAs comes as the school choice movement in general is surging.

At least a half-dozen states have smaller "course choice" programs, which allow students enrolled in traditional public schools to customize their education by taking some of their classes elsewhere. In Louisiana, for instance, the state will pay for certain public school students to take classes run by local businesses, unions and colleges. They can even take classes offered by for-profit companies, such as Princeton Review.

Comment [GF1]: As opposed to letting the state bureaucracy design a mediocre education for your children – at taxpayer expense! GF

Comment [GF2]: Actually, twenty-four states plus D.C. But who's counting? (Not Simon.) GF

Comment [GF3]: Somehow, when the government monopoly school system comes around demanding more money (far more than we ever give to school choice programs) nobody calls it a "subsidy." GF

Comment [YB4]: As opposed to all the waste and abuse in the government school system, where the "quality controls" are working so splendidly.

<http://www.thecartelmovie.com/> -JB

Comment [YB5]: For context, see here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPEkK5nfu3Y> - JB

Comment [GF6]: So . . . seems like the system works a whole lot better than the government school monopoly, where these kinds of shenanigans aren't so rigorously policed. GF

Traditional voucher and tax credit programs also remain popular. At least a dozen states are expected to consider enacting or expanding them this year. Republicans including Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker and Indiana Gov. Mike Pence are leading the charge, but they're not alone. New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat, is pushing his legislature to enact tax credits to encourage donations to private school scholarships. One factor propelling the movement: The simmering anger on both left and right at the Common Core, standardized testing and federal mandates have made "local control" quite the buzzword in state legislatures. And "the ultimate local control is parental control," said Oklahoma state Rep. Jason Nelson, a Republican who has introduced an ESA bill. To drive home that point, advocates of the accounts showcase parents like Kathy Visser, who receives \$27,000 a year from Arizona to educate her 10-year-old son, Jordan. She uses the funds to design an a la carte education tailored just for Jordan, who has cerebral palsy and struggled in traditional schools. His weekly schedule includes sessions with a private reading tutor, science classes at a local museum, piano lessons, swim team fees and therapeutic horseback riding. Like all participants in the Arizona program, Visser must agree to provide her son an education in the core academic subjects, but it's up to her how to do that. "We're just so grateful," Visser said.

Comment [YB7]: Actually about two dozen. -JB

But many advocates for traditional public education are horrified at the concept, saying it's not fair to force taxpayers to pick up the tab for whatever curriculum a parent assembles. A POLITICO investigation last year found that states already subsidize hundreds of creationist schools through vouchers and tax credits. Parents enrolled in ESAs could also use public funds to teach the Bible as biology text. Florida does require homeschooling parents, including those with ESAs, to show local education officials portfolios of their child's work on request. But Arizona doesn't have any mechanisms to ensure that ESA participants are getting rigorous or well-rounded educations. The state did not immediately respond to a request for comment on this issue. ESAs create "an unregulated, unaccountable market," said Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers. "Instead of the exit strategy from public education that these programs represent, we need a renewed commitment to strong neighborhood public schools for every child." Other critics fear a two-tier system will emerge: Families with the time, energy and savvy to put together education plans for their children will take advantage of ESAs, while parents with less income, education or fluency in English will remain with the public system. That's a particular concern for advocates for students with disabilities, who worry that it will be hard for traditional public schools to provide robust services for special needs children as their enrollments shrink — and their budgets dwindle accordingly. "So many parents of students with disabilities fought incredibly hard to put inclusive practices into federal and state education laws. Policymakers need to stop for a minute and consider that these ESA programs are a retreat from that effort," said Brett Schaeffer, a policy analyst with the Education Law Center of Pennsylvania.

Comment [GF8]: As opposed to forcing taxpayers to pick up the tab for whatever curriculum the state bureaucracy or an incompetent, union-protected educator assembles. GF

Comment [YB9]: "Unaccountable" to government bureaucrats, perhaps, but directly accountable to parents. -JB

Comment [YB10]: So Weingarten is afraid that, given the choice, parents would not choose to send their children to their assigned district schools. Interesting. It seems that she doesn't have much faith in her own product. -JB

Comment [GF11]: Sure, maybe us rich white people can do this. But who will stand up for the interests of the poor, incompetent brown people who can't manage their own lives, as we can? We must shoulder the white man's burden! GF

Comment [YB12]: Clearly, parents are not fully satisfied with that effort. Jonathan Butcher and I surveyed parents with special-needs children participating in Arizona's ESA program and less than half of the survey respondents reported being satisfied with the public school their child had previously attended. However, 100% were satisfied with the education their children received with the ESA funds.

ESAs aren't a "retreat," but a great advance.

<http://www.edchoice.org/Research/Reports/Schooling-Satisfaction--Arizona-Parents--Opinions-on-Using-Education-Savings-Accounts.aspx> -JB

Comment [YB13]: All of whom received a subsidized government education. -JB

Starting small

An estimated 314,000 students across the U.S. received a subsidized private education last year. That's just a fraction of the nation's 55 million public school students, but it's a fast-growing fraction — up 50 percent from two years earlier, according to the Friedman Foundation, which promotes school choice. Programs often start small and narrowly targeted to children with special needs, those living in poverty or those attending low-

performing schools. The Florida ESA, which launched this school year, is available only to students with one of seven specific disabilities, including autism, cerebral palsy and severe cognitive impairment. Once they're established, however, programs often spread quickly. Florida lawmakers appropriated \$18.4 million for their program this year. Republican Gov. Rick Scott has proposed hiking that \$23.5 million next year, and some lawmakers have kicked around even higher figures.

Comment [YB14]: Not quickly enough! -JB

Comment [YB15]: For context, Florida spends about \$25 billion on its public school system, more than 1,000 times the amount spent on the ESA program. -JB

Comment [YB16]: Note: those students would have cost the state even more had they attended their assigned district schools. -JB

In Arizona, lawmakers have expanded eligibility for their ESA several times so that it's open to 230,000 children this year — one in five public school students. More than 1,300 students are participating this year at a cost to the state of \$16.3 million. That's just a sliver of those eligible, but it's nearly double last year's enrollment. Advocates expect continued growth as word of the program spreads. Other states are also considering going big. One bill up for debate in Oklahoma this session would let all 675,000 students in the state use an ESA. (An alternative bill would limit eligibility to low-income families.) The Virginia bill, meanwhile, does not set an income limit. It would make ESAs available to any child with a disability that requires some accommodation in public schools, including asthma and allergies. "As outcomes are demonstrated, it can grow," said Delegate David LaRock, a Republican.

The iPhones of the choice movement

ESAs have become trendy in part because they suit the modern sensibility of customizing everything from sneakers to playlists, advocates say. Charter schools and voucher programs "were the rotary telephones of our movement" — but ESAs are the iPhones, declared Matthew Ladner, senior policy advisor at the Foundation for Excellence in Education, in a recent blog post. ESAs are also catching on because they offer a way to circumvent provisions in many state constitutions that prohibit spending public funds on religious schools. Such language often trips up traditional voucher programs. But the Arizona Supreme Court last spring let stand a lower-court ruling that found the ESA structure was constitutional because it puts the public funds, and the choice of how to spend them, in the hands of parents. Advocates say that structure may well protect the programs from constitutional challenges in other states as well. Supporters pitch ESAs as cost-effective and dismiss concerns from teachers unions that they will drain money from the public education system. Participants typically receive 85 percent to 90 percent of the funds the state would otherwise spend to educate them in public schools. Another 3 percent to 5 percent is spent administering the program, including verifying that parents are using the money for valid educational purposes. The remaining funds can then be redistributed to the public schools. In practice, however, the programs aren't always revenue-neutral, depending on how the legislature writes the rules.

Comment [YB17]: Remember when public school advocates used to complain incessantly that they weren't getting enough money for special-needs students and had to supplement their education with money from the general fund? Now that those students are being offered alternatives, suddenly the public schools are arguing that that would "drain funds." Does that mean the schools were getting enough money for the special-needs students all along? -JB

In both Arizona and Florida, for instance, some students can apply for an ESA even if they have never attended public school. That means the state can end up subsidizing private or home-based educations for children whose families previously covered those costs themselves. John Kurnik, a 12-year-old from Tampa, is among nearly 1,500 students participating in the Florida ESA. His parents have home-schooled him and his older sister since kindergarten but weren't able to afford additional support for John, who has autism. Through the ESA, the state has deposited \$10,000 in an account for John this year; his parents have used it for behavioral counseling, math tutoring and other needs, said his father, also named John Kurnik. Kurnik said he could understand why outsiders might

question the need to give the family control of public education funds when they have never even tried the public education system. He argued that taxpayers would benefit in the long run by helping John develop the skills he will need to become a productive citizen. "It was a really big deal for us," Kurnik said. "Before this, we were triaging." As for the family who tried to use the Florida ESA to subsidize a European vacation? Staff at Step Up for Students, a nonprofit that administers the program, had a brief debate and then denied the request. "We're trying to open the door as wide as possible for families to try new educational options," said Jon East, the group's policy director. "But for this to be done right, there has to be someone down the line who says, 'Wait a minute. We're not going to go there.'"