

Preface: Expanding Opportunity Nationwide

America’s education system is evolving.

For more than a century, most children have attended the district school to which they were assigned based on the location of their parents’ home. For the most part, children are assigned to a grade level based on the year they were born and are expected to advance at roughly the same pace as their same-aged peers across all subjects—a system that bores advanced students while others struggle to keep up.

This Industrial Age “factory model” of education served a purpose in a bygone era, but it is woefully inadequate for the educational needs of the Information Age. What’s needed today is an education system tailored to the learning needs of each individual student rather than some imagined “median” child. However, we should not expect that any one school will be able to meet the unique learning needs of every child who just happens to live nearby. No school can be all things to all children. The time has come to transition from an institution-centered education system to a child-centered one.

Education savings accounts (ESAs) are a key method to make that transition. In states that offer ESAs, parents can opt their child out of their assigned school and have a portion of the funds follow their child to their chosen school or learning environment. ESAs empower families to tailor their child’s education with a variety of educational services and products including private school tuition, educational therapy, textbooks, online courses, curricular materials, and more.

In 2011, Arizona became the first state to adopt an ESA program. Eligibility was originally limited to students with special needs and the legislature has subsequently expanded eligibility to include students assigned to low-performing district schools, children adopted through the state’s foster system, children in military

families, children living on Native American reservations, and siblings of eligible students. About 150 students participated during the first year of operation and by the fall of 2016, more than 3,200 are using ESAs.

In 2013, Jonathan Butcher of the Goldwater Institute and I conducted the first-ever survey of ESA families in Arizona.¹ All of the respondents were parents of students with special needs. Our survey found unanimous parental satisfaction with the education their children were receiving using the accounts, including 71 percent who were “very satisfied.”

By contrast, only 43 percent of ESA parents were satisfied with district school their child attended prior to receiving an ESA. Some complained that their children weren’t challenged in their assigned school, or that they were bullied, or that the school did not have the resources to handle their child’s particular condition. The ESA provided these families with viable educational alternatives.

The views of ESA parents are likely not reflective of the general population. Nevertheless, even if most parents are happy with their district school, the survey showed that those schools were not meeting the needs of a sizeable portion of families, thereby demonstrating the need for additional options.

It is not surprising to see similar results in this survey of ESA parents in Mississippi. When empowered with more educational opportunities, parents are more likely to be happy with the learning environment they chose for their children.

Mississippi’s ESA for students with special needs is a huge step toward a future in which all children have access to the quality education that works best for them.

— Jason Bedrick, Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom