

HB 2119 – Student Empowerment Act

Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the committee.

My name is Jason Bedrick and I am the director of policy for EdChoice, a non-partisan, non-profit organization dedicated to advancing educational freedom and choice for all as the pathway to successful lives and a stronger society.

Educational choice options give parents the freedom to choose the best learning environment for their children using the public education funding already allocated for their child. This ensures every child can access an excellent education, regardless of race, income, background, or ZIP Code.

HB 2119 would create a new Education Savings Account (ESA) policy similar to the ESA policies in several other states. 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 with restricted, but multiple, uses. In Kansas, the ESAs would be funded at an amount equal to the BASE aid that the state provides for each pupil, which is a fraction of the more than \$16,000 in total spent per pupil annually at Kansas public schools. As of the 2020-21 academic year, there are more than 29,000 students using ESAs in five states: Arizona, Florida, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Tennessee.

Unlike vouchers, which are limited to paying for private school tuition, families can use ESA funds for a wide variety of educational products and services, such as tuition and fees, online learning programs, private tutoring, textbooks, educational therapy, community college costs, individual classes at public schools, higher education expenses and other approved customized learning services and materials. Families typically access their ESA funds via an online portal or a restricted-use debit card, depending on the state. Families can even roll over unused ESA funds from year to year to save for future education expenses.

ESAs maximize the freedom and flexibility of families to customize their child's education while providing a high degree of financial transparency and accountability to ensure that the funds are only being used for their intended purposes. Here's how they work around the country:

- 1) The eligible family receives a restricted-use debit card or account via an online portal that is loaded quarterly with allotted funds for their child's education.
- 2) The family uses the card or online portal for approved educational expenses. Debit cards can be used only with vendors approved by the state—such as accredited and licensed therapists, tutors, and approved private schools—after which the family submits receipts to the approved administrative agent for quarterly audits. With online portals, such as ClassWallet, families can only use ESA funds for educational products and services that have been approved to be accessed via the portal.
- 3) Families may roll over funds quarterly, and any unused ESA funds at the end of the year can be used the following year. In some states, parents may place unused funds into a college savings account upon their child's high school graduation to use toward college tuition within a four-year time block.

ESAs empower families to choose the learning environment that works best for their child while providing a high level of accountability. For example, Arizona's Auditor General found under their debit-card system, approximately 99 percent of ESA funds were spent for approved purposes. Moreover, most

of the misspent funds were innocent errors (e.g., purchasing pens and paper or other school supplies) and the funds were recovered. The tiny amount of fraud was mostly related to ESA debit cards that had been lost, stolen or compromised. Arizona is now transitioning to an online portal managed by ClassWallet that should entirely eliminate misspending.

The families that have been fortunate enough to benefit from ESA policies in other states report being highly satisfied. For example, the first-ever survey of ESA families in Arizona found parents were universally satisfied with the education their child received using an ESA, including seven in 10 families who were “very satisfied.” Moreover, families from the lowest income quintile were simultaneously the most likely to be dissatisfied with their previous public school (67 percent) and the most likely to say they were very satisfied with their ESA (89 percent).

Parents are right to be satisfied. Out of 17 studies of the effect of educational choice programs on the academic performance of participating students, 11 found statistically significant positive effects on standardized tests, four found no visible effects, and only three found negative effects. Moreover, four out of six studies found that choice programs boost rates of high school graduation and college enrollment. Two found no effects and none found any negative effects.

The research also overwhelming finds that educational choice programs benefit students who remain in the district schools. Out of 27 studies, 25 find that traditional public schools improve their performance on standardized tests after the introduction of a choice program while only one study found a negative effect and one found no visible effect.

It’s no wonder then that support for funding students instead of systems is so high. According to my organization’s most recent nationwide survey, 77 percent of parents of school-aged children expressed and 69 percent of all adults support for an ESA policy while only 9 percent were opposed. In Kansas, 68 percent of all adults expressed support for ESAs.

All the information I discussed today can be found on our website, www.edchoice.org or at the links I provide below. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today regarding this vital issue.

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Sources

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