

FAMILY ISSUE FACT SHEET

NO. 2021-10 (JANUARY 2021)

SB 1452 EMPOWERMENT SCHOLARSHIP ACCOUNTS; PROGRAM REVISIONS; LOW-INCOME STUDENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Arizona's Empowerment Scholarship Account (ESA) program currently provides students from certain underserved populations the funding necessary to allow them to pursue the education that best meets their unique educational needs. SB 1452 includes low-income students among those eligible and addresses eligibility concerns brought on by the COVID-19 shutdown.

The opportunities ESAs provide are especially critical during a pandemic that has forced many students into online learning. Most low-income families do not have the resources to adapt to online learning, including access to computers or the internet. Students cannot afford to lose another year of instruction. ESAs allow these students the opportunity to get back to the classroom or find the educational option that best fits their needs.

BACKGROUND

The ESA program allows parents to withdraw their children from a district or charter school and receive 90% of state funds allocated for their child for a variety of educational expenses, including therapy, tutors, textbooks, curriculum, tuition at private schools, and even fees for standardized tests. Federal and local funds stay with the school district.

As originally passed in 2011, the ESA program was only available to students with disabilities. Since then, Arizona has expanded those qualified for the program, and it now includes:

- Students in foster care
- Students living on an Indian reservation
- Students in failing or underperforming school districts
- Students with a parent who is on active military duty or was killed in the line of duty
- Students with a parent who is legally blind, deaf, or hard of hearing
- Students with a sibling who is a current or former ESA recipient

REVISIONS/INCREASE ELIGIBILITY TO LOW-INCOME STUDENTS

SB 1452 would:

- Increases ESA eligibility to low-income students, which include students who receive federal Title I services or attend a Title I school and students who receive free or reduced-price lunches under the National School Lunch and Child Nutrition Acts.

- Allow each student's allocation from the state Classroom Site Fund to follow that student when they transfer to the ESA program.

- Address closures due to COVID-19 by modifying requirements for first graders who otherwise would not qualify because the COVID-19 shutdowns during the students' kindergarten year.
- Adjust eligibility to include any student who a school district or charter counted among their enrollees the prior fiscal year, whether in-person, or online.
- Reduce the requirement that ESA applicants spend the "first 100 days" of the prior year in public school to "any 30 days" and establishes students as qualified who may not have clocked in all the required online hours during COVID-19 in the 2020 school year.
- Allows ESA funds to support student transportation costs, including public transportation passes or commercial transportation between a student's home and school.
- Ends the double charging of ESA expenditures when families repay misspent funds

A large majority of Arizonans – a full 70% – support expanding the ESA program to low-income families.¹

TALKING POINTS

- **Many low-income families do not have access to computers or the internet. When schools shut down in-person learning because of COVID-19, those students were left out. This bill allows those students to get back to school and get back to learning.**
- **Education policy should put children first.** ESAs put children first by ensuring families are able to choose the educational setting that best meets their child's unique needs. SB 1452 would open up this opportunity to low-income families.
- **The average ESA scholarship [\$5,700] puts private school tuition within reach for the most economically disadvantaged families.**
- **COVID-19 has shut down in-person learning, crippling the learning momentum of many students, and leaving others out altogether. Low-income students should have the opportunity to go to school.** A full 70-percent of Arizonans support increasing eligibility to low-income students.
- **ESAs save the state money.** The state would face significantly higher costs if the more than 6,300 children currently on ESAs were to be forced back into the public schools because the amount that can go into an ESA is limited to 90% of what the state would have spent on the student. Federal and local funding stay with the school district.

CONCLUSION

Arizona's Empowerment Scholarship Account program allows parents to find the educational setting that best meets their child's unique educational needs. Now it is time to give low-income families the choice to apply for this pioneering program that has benefited so many children since 2011. This is especially critical during the COVID-19 pandemic when many schools are shut down for in-person learning. Low-income students should have other educational options available to them.

ⁱ Data Orbital 12/16-19 2020 600N