

# SAVE OUR SCHOOLS ACT

## WHO WE ARE

Local volunteer group Save Our Schools Arizona®, formed by six moms in 2017 to fight a massive expansion to the state's private school voucher program (known as Empowerment Scholarship Accounts or ESA), is now leading a statewide citizens' initiative to **reform the ESA voucher program in order to more responsibly manage taxpayer dollars and better serve Arizona students.**

## OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT ESA VOUCHER PROGRAM

The ESA voucher program currently costs the state of Arizona **\$110 million per year** to pay for the private, often religious, school tuition and personal educational expenses of approximately 7,000 students.

ESA vouchers are state tax dollars cut from public schools and given directly to recipients via debit card or wire transfer. **The average ESA voucher per student per year is \$12,585**, though some students get closer to **\$6,000 and others \$40,000 per student per year**. The average state spending for Arizona **public district and charter school students is \$5,550** per student per year.

As it is now, the **ESA voucher program does not give priority for students with special needs**, which make up approximately 60% of the ESA voucher population. The other 40% of the ESA voucher program is first-come-first-served for students with a military parent, students who would otherwise attend a D school, students who would otherwise attend an F school, students who are or ever were in foster care, students who live on tribal reservations and all siblings of any qualified students.

As it is now, the ESA voucher program **allows recipients to "roll over" all unspent state funds** year after year, with some recipients maintaining **balances of over \$100,000**. The ESA voucher program also allows recipients to continue using the state's K-12 education funds to pay for **personal college expenses** after the ESA voucher student has graduated from high school and until the age of 22.

Current Arizona law allows ESA voucher recipients to **transfer state funds to their children's personal college savings accounts**, such as Coverdell or 529 accounts.

It is **unknown if and how the state retrieves the funds** ESA voucher recipients don't use on appropriate expenses during or after their K-12 education.

## HOW THE SAVE OUR SCHOOLS ACT WOULD HELP

Enacted by a YES vote by a majority of Arizona voters, the Save Our Schools Act would make the following improvements to the Empowerment Scholarship Account program:

- ESA voucher recipients **may not transfer state funds to personal banking accounts**
- Establishes the **Taxpayer Protection Fund to pay for increased oversight**, customer service and improved administration of ESA voucher funds
- Any ESA voucher funds not used during the school year will **return to the Taxpayer Protection Fund on June 30**
- Excess funds will be transferred to the **Extraordinary Special Needs Fund**, which has been unfunded for years and serves the 100,000+ disabled students in public schools
- Limits the size of the ESA voucher program at **1% of the total** Arizona student population, which still allows for modest growth
- Grants current ESA voucher **students with disabilities priority access** for funding, new applicants with disabilities next priority, and all others as available
- Private schools, tutors and aides paid with ESA voucher funds **must be located in Arizona.**

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

**Q** *Would the SOSAct “kick out” any students currently using ESA vouchers?*

**A** No. **The SOSAct allows all current recipients to keep their ESA voucher.** In fact, the SOSAct allows for thousands of new applicants, and ensures that applicants with disabilities get first priority.

**Q** *Would the SOSAct mean students currently eligible could no longer apply?*

**A** No. The SOSAct retains the **same eligibility criteria** currently in state law.

**Q** *Would the SOSAct mean students have to change their school or tutors?*

**A** No. The SOSAct **makes no changes to funding, allowable purchases, or other qualifications.** The **only change closes a loophole** that K-12 funds can be used for personal college expenses even after graduation.

**Q** *Doesn't the ESA voucher program help poor children get out of bad situations?*

**A** No, there is **no wealth limit on the current program.** In fact, most ESA voucher recipients live in middle or high-income areas, withdrawing from A and B rated schools. Although more families can afford the lower cost of private elementary education, it's mostly affluent families who can choose private schools and make up the gap between the ESA voucher and the true cost of private high school tuition, which can reach \$20,000 per year.

**Q** *Doesn't the cap hurt students with disabilities who may need this program?*

**A** The SOSAct would **prioritize Arizona special needs students for the first time** - the existing program does not prioritize these students. By tying the cap to overall student population and instituting a priority for special needs students, spots for special needs students will continually open as students graduate/age out, as the population of Arizona grows, and as the new priority system ensures access for the children most in need. Paired with better funding for public school Special Education, the SOSAct will prioritize children with disabilities in a way the Legislature has refused to do year after year - both in the ESA voucher program and by funding the Extraordinary Special Needs fund for the 100,000+ disabled students choosing Arizona public schools.

**Q** *Why is this law needed?*

**A** Since Empowerment Scholarship Accounts (ESA vouchers) were first created in 2011 exclusively for Arizona students with disabilities, **national special interest groups like those led by Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos and Charles and David Koch have promoted changes to Arizona law that expanded the original program.** What began as a **\$1.6 million** program for disabled students now includes almost as many non-disabled students at a cost of \$110 million per year. What's more, as it's grown, the program has been plagued by **misspending, lack of oversight, loopholes, and massive expansion efforts** to qualify students regardless of need, to pay for private schools in other states, and other irresponsible attempts to loosen the rules around how tax dollars are spent - all despite widespread opposition from voters.

**Q** *How can I learn more or get involved in protecting Arizona students and taxpayers?*

**A** Visit [YesSOSAZ.com](http://YesSOSAZ.com)

