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The Impact of Tuition Scholarships on Low-Income Families: A Survey of Arizona School Choice Trust Parents

by Dan Lips, President, Arizona Dream Foundation, and Associate Scholar, Goldwater Institute

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On May 11, 1993, Jack and Isabelle McVaugh and other prominent members of the Phoenix community held a press conference at Olympic boxer Michael Carbajal's gym, announcing the formation of Arizona School Choice Trust (ASCT). The privately funded scholarship program would give low-income students in Maricopa County the opportunity to attend private school. Within 10 days of announcing the scholarships, ASCT had 500 students on its waiting list.

ASCT awarded 54 scholarships in 1993-1994. Ten years later, ASCT is providing scholarships to 572 students for the 2003-2004 school year, thanks largely to the Arizona scholarship tax credit program enacted in 1997. Another 2,000 students are on the ASCT waiting list.

A survey of the parents of children receiving scholarships and those on the waiting list suggests that a significant number of Arizona families with incomes below \$30,000 is benefiting from school choice policies. Survey results show that parents who are able to exercise school choice are generally more satisfied with their children's educations. More than 80 percent of parents choosing private schools had overall satisfaction ratings of A, whereas less than 20 percent of parents with children in public or charter schools expressed equal satisfaction. The median parental satisfaction grade for private schools was A, while charter schools and public schools scored median grades of B and C, respectively. The findings also suggest that many more low-income families wish to participate, and believe their children would be better off if they had the opportunity to choose different schools.

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Introduction

In 1991, Pat Rooney, chairman of the board of Golden Rule Insurance Co., created a privately funded school choice scholarship program for students from low-income families in Indianapolis, Indiana. That year, the *Wall Street Journal* profiled Rooney's effort. Among the story's readers were Jack and Isabelle McVaugh, retirees in Arizona, who liked Rooney's idea. "We had always felt," they later explained, "that lower-income families should have the same opportunities to send their kids to the better schools that we and our children had."¹ The McVaughs decided to create a similar, privately funded school choice organization in Phoenix.

On May 11, 1993, the McVaughs announced the formation of Arizona School Choice Trust (ASCT), a privately funded scholarship program serving Maricopa County residents who qualified for the federal free and reduced-price school lunch program.² On July 18, 1993, the *Arizona Republic* published a request for applications for the ASCT program. Within 10 days, ASCT had 500 students on its scholarship waiting list.

Today, ASCT is providing scholarships to 572 students for the 2003-2004 school year, thanks largely to the Arizona scholarship tax credit

program enacted in 1997. Another 2,000 students are on a waiting list hoping for a scholarship.

To evaluate the impact of the ASCT program, I surveyed the parents of children receiving scholarships and those on the waiting list. The surveys inquired about the parents' satisfaction with their children's schools, their level of involvement with their schools, and views about school choice.

The data suggest that parents who are able to exercise school choice are generally more satisfied with their children's educations. More than 80 percent of parents choosing private schools had overall satisfaction ratings of A, whereas less than 20 percent of parents with children in public or charter schools expressed equal satisfaction. The median parental satisfaction grade for private schools was A, while charter schools and public schools scored median grades of B and C, respectively.

The survey of ASCT participants provides a glimpse into the sentiments of the entire Arizona student population. The survey findings suggest that a significant number of Arizona families with incomes below \$30,000 is benefiting from school choice policies. The findings also suggest that many more low-income families wish to

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participate and believe that their children would be better off if they had the ability to choose different schools.

The Growth of Arizona School Choice Trust

During the 1993-1994 school year, Arizona School Choice Trust awarded 54 scholarships to low-income students to attend private schools of their choice. In August of 2003, ASCT awarded 572 scholarships. Over the past ten years, ASCT has awarded 3,477 scholarships. Figure 1 shows the growth in scholarship awards over time.

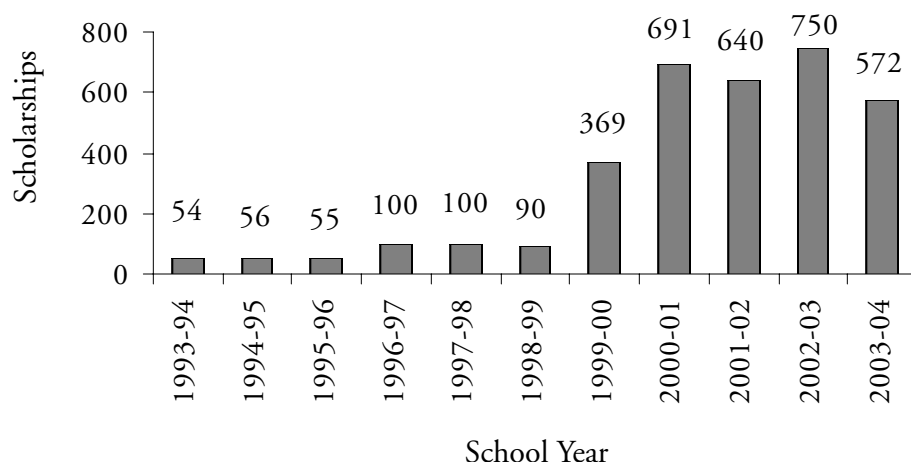
During the first five years of the program, all scholarships were privately

funded, and averaged between \$575 and \$700 per student. ASCT scholarships have never covered the full cost of tuition, as the founders believed making a financial sacrifice increases the parents' stake in their children's educations. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the average cost of private school tuition in 1994 was \$3,116.³ It is likely that many of the lower-income families – who averaged a median annual income of \$17,800 in 1995⁴ – were making great sacrifices to pay the difference between their ASCT scholarship and the full price of tuition.

For the first five years, scholarship funding primarily came from private individuals. Local charities also supported the effort, and additional matching grants were secured from

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Figure 1. Arizona School Choice Trust Scholarships Awarded Annually, 1993-2003



Source: Arizona School Choice Trust

national school choice philanthropy organizations, such as Children’s Scholarship Fund and Children First America.

As Figure 1 shows, ASCT’s ability to distribute scholarships grew substantially in 1999, thanks to the creation of the Arizona scholarship tax credit program. On April 7, 1997, Arizona governor J. Fife Symington III signed into law HB2074, the “private school tax credit” law, which let individuals claim a dollar-for-dollar income tax credit for up to \$500 for donations to school tuition organizations (STOs) that fund private school scholarships.⁵

In 1997, ASCT was the state’s most prominent school choice scholarship organization, and many considered it a model during the drafting of the legislation.⁶ Since the creation of the scholarship tax credit, ASCT has raised more than \$4.3 million from tax credit donations.⁷ All but \$10,000 of these donations came after a 1999 Arizona State Supreme Court decision that removed any doubts about the legality of the scholarship tax credit program.⁸ The tax credit vastly increased the revenue that organizations like ASCT could raise, helping them assist even more students.

During the 2002-2003 school year, ACST awarded 757 scholarships to children from low-income families. The average household income for grant recipients was \$29,182. The average grant was \$1,377 and the average family tuition co-payment was \$1,489.⁹ While

ASCT grants are still being distributed for the 2003-2004 school year, there are currently 572 students receiving grants worth an average of \$1,581.¹⁰ The number of scholarships awarded declined due to an increase in the number of donations that were designated for use at particular private schools.

Jack and Isabelle McVaugh probably never imagined just how large this organization – and the entire scholarship movement – would become when they began providing scholarships to just 54 students in 1993-1994. But as they were quick to point out in a recent interview, even that successful growth doesn’t match their hopes for the program. “We never have enough funding to clean up our waiting list, though it’s better than it used to be,” they write. “The waiting list never goes away, which only proves the great need.”¹¹ ASCT currently has approximately 2,000 children on its scholarship waiting list.

Arizona School Choice Trust Program Policies

Arizona School Choice Trust is one of 47 non-profit school tuition organizations in Arizona that are eligible to receive and distribute scholarship tax credit donations. The majority of the organizations are affiliated with particular religious organizations or instructional methods. ASCT distinguishes itself by allowing children to choose among any of the private

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schools in the state.

ASCT's mission is to help low-income families send their children to schools of their choice. ASCT uses one primary criterion for awarding scholarships: financial need. Scholarships are awarded to eligible recipients on a first-come, first-served basis. Some preference is given to students transferring from public to private schools. The size of the scholarship is determined using a sliding scale based on financial need so that families with the greatest need are given the largest scholarships. The maximum scholarship is \$3,000 per student. Table 1 outlines ASCT's income eligibility requirements for the 2003-2004 school year.

Donors contributing to ASCT cannot earmark or give their contributions to specific students. However, donors can request that funds be used to

provide scholarships to specific schools. According to ASCT program administrators, approximately 50 percent of all donors designated schools last year.¹²

The Impact of the ASCT Scholarship Program

There is little data or analysis assessing the impact that the scholarship tax credit program is making on students' lives. Various organizations, including the Cato Institute, Arizona State University, and People for the American Way, have recently issued reports on the perceived fiscal policy impact of the scholarship tax credit program.¹³ Yet, none of those studies has sought to provide a better understanding of how the program affects its beneficiaries: the families and students receiving scholarships.

The size of an ASCT scholarship is determined using a sliding scale based on financial need so that families with the greatest need are given the largest scholarships. The maximum scholarship is \$3,000 per student.

Table 1. Arizona School Choice Trust Income Thresholds

Household Size	2002 Total Household Income (\$)		
	Percent of Tuition Covered		
	75%	50%	25%
2	11,940	22,089	32,238
3	15,020	33,485	40,544
4	18,100	33,485	48,870
5	21,180	39,183	57,186
6	24,260	44,881	65,502
7	27,340	50,579	73,818
Each Additional Dependent, add:	3,080	5,698	8,316

Source: Arizona School Choice Trust, <http://www.asct.org/apply.htm>.

The Arizona Dream Foundation surveyed the parents of each child in the ASCT program and on the ASCT waiting list. To accurately assess each family's experience with the program, families of scholarship recipients and families with children on the waiting list were asked separate sets of questions.

In January 1996 – a year prior to the passage of the tuition tax credit law – the Goldwater Institute published a report documenting the findings of a survey of 27 of 29 families participating in the ASCT program.¹⁴ The study found that the ASCT scholarship program was improving the lives of its participants, who came from predominantly low-income and minority families. Table 2 presents a summary of the 1996 survey findings. Importantly, the study found that the majority of scholarship recipients had previously attended public school, 90 percent believed that their private schools were doing a good or excellent job, and 75 percent believed that without a scholarship they would have to remove their children from private school and send them back to the public system.

In October 2003, the Arizona

Dream Foundation, a non-profit organization whose mission is to inform the public about the benefits of school choice, surveyed ASCT program participants. The 2003 survey updates the findings from the 1995-1996 survey to assess the current impact of the greatly expanded ASCT program.

Working with ASCT staff, the Arizona Dream Foundation surveyed the parents of each child in the ASCT program and on the ASCT waiting list. To accurately assess each family's experience with the program, families of scholarship recipients and families with children on the waiting list were asked separate sets of questions.

Both surveys were sent with a letter from ASCT volunteer president Keith DeGreen, which explained the purpose of the survey and asked for the families'

Table 2. Major Findings of 1996 ASCT Parent Survey

Factor	Finding
Demographics	Forty-eight percent of the families were Hispanic, and 13 percent had multiple ethnicities.
Income	The median income was \$17,800, or 40 percent below the average annual income for all Arizona families of \$29,600.
Parental Satisfaction	Ninety percent of parents reported that their children's private schools were doing a good or excellent job.
Prior School	Fifty-eight percent of children had previously attended public school.
School Choice	Without an ASCT scholarship, 75 percent of the children might have had to leave private school.

Source: Tara Ellman, "Arizona School Choice Trust – A Survey of Participating Families," Arizona Issue Analysis, no. 138, Goldwater Institute, January 1996.

voluntary cooperation. The families were assured that the Arizona Dream Foundation would independently review their survey answers and that individual survey responses would not be shared with ASCT staff. Importantly, DeGreen's letter explained that their answers – or failure to return the survey – would in no way affect their standing in the ASCT program. Families were given an addressed-stamped envelope to return to the Arizona Dream Foundation.

Surveys were sent to each of the 572 students currently on scholarship, and to the approximately 2,000 students on the ASCT waiting list, for a total data pool of 2,572 families. One survey was sent for each student, and because many families have more than one child on scholarship or on the waiting list, many families returned multiple surveys. However, because the survey questions were written to assess each student's individual experience, it was necessary and appropriate for families to return more than one survey.

Of the 2,573 surveys issued, 730 were returned – 198 from scholarship recipient families and 532 from waiting list families – for a total response rate of 28 percent. The scholarship recipients' return rate was 35 percent, slightly higher than the 27 percent return rate for waiting list families. It seems logical that scholarship recipients would be more likely than those on the waiting list to return their surveys because families that receive scholarships have a greater stake in the ASCT program, and are

accustomed to receiving correspondence from ASCT, making them more likely to review the material.

Respondents from across the state returned surveys. Families of students on scholarships named more than 60 different schools that their children were attending, while families of those on the waiting list named over 140 schools. The diversity of schools participating reflects the ASCT policy that children awarded scholarships can choose from any private school in the state.

Survey Questions

Scholarship recipients were asked 36 questions and waiting list families were asked 27 questions. The additional questions for scholarship recipients concerned their experience with ASCT program administration.

Both surveys included numerous questions designed to gather background information about the participating families. For example, families were asked about their household size, marital status, race and ethnicity, annual income, and language spoken in the household.

Both sets of families were asked identical questions regarding parents' satisfaction with their children's current schools. This allows for a direct comparison between parents who are currently benefiting from school choice scholarships and those who are waiting

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Scholarship and waiting list families were also asked the same questions about their involvement with their children's schools, including how frequently the parents visited and volunteered at the schools, and how often they talked with their children's teachers.

Both sets of survey respondents were asked five questions about school choice in Arizona, including questions about the family's knowledge, participation, and support for the scholarship tax credit program. Parents were also asked whether they would support additional school choice programs in Arizona, such as a corporate scholarship tax credit or a voucher program.

The surveys also asked about participation in the ASCT program. Each scholarship family was questioned about how long their child had been receiving a scholarship, the scholarship size, and the school that their child attended prior to receiving a scholarship. Waiting list families were asked how long their children had been on the waiting list, the types of schools their children currently attend, and the reasons why they had applied for the scholarships.

The final section of the survey invited parents to describe their experiences either with an ASCT scholarship or on the ASCT waiting list. Many parents took advantage of that option, with most scholarship recipients

expressing their thanks and appreciation, while many waiting list families described their frustrations, hardships, and reasons for applying for scholarships.

The only major differences between the surveys sent to scholarship recipient and waiting list families were three sets of additional questions asked of ASCT scholarship recipient families. These questions sought to gain insight into their experiences with private schools and with the ASCT scholarship program administration. The survey asked parents about testing and accountability procedures at their children's private schools, and about how transportation affects the private school experience.

Survey Results

Following is a summary of the survey results in six categories: 1) background information; 2) parental satisfaction with the school experience; 3) parental involvement; 4) additional educational questions for ASCT recipient families; 5) opinions regarding school choice in Arizona; and 6) an optional essay section for personal information. Comparisons are drawn between scholarship recipient and waiting list families for each section.

Background Information

It is useful to compare the family background of the scholarship recipients' families and the waiting list

Scholarship and waiting list families were asked the same questions about their involvement with their children's schools, including how frequently the parents visited and volunteered at the schools, and how often they talked with their children's teachers.

families as it puts into context their responses to other portions of the survey. As expected, given that scholarships are distributed on a first come, first-served basis to families with a demonstrated financial need, the backgrounds and family characteristics of those on the waiting list are very similar to those who received scholarships.

However, as shown in Table 3, scholarship recipients are more likely than those on the waiting list to belong

to families with married parents. Those receiving scholarships also have slightly larger families.

As Table 4 shows, ASCT applicants – both those who received scholarships and those on the waiting list – come from diverse backgrounds. However, of those who responded to the survey, scholarship recipients were more likely to be white than those on the waiting list, while those on the waiting list were more likely to be Hispanic, multiracial

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Table 3. Comparison of Family Size and Composition

	Scholarship Recipients	Waiting List
Average Number of Adults ^a	1.85	1.85
Average Number of Children	3.40	2.66
Married Parents (%)	73	63
Divorced Parents (%)	16	20
Single or Separated Parents (%)	11	15
English as Primary Language at Home (%)	87	86

^a“Adults” does not necessarily mean parents, as many respondents indicated that adults included adult children and other relatives.

Table 4. Comparison of Race and Ethnicity

Race	Scholarship Recipients (%)	Waiting List (%)
African-American	2.0	4.4
Asian	0.5	2.9
Biracial	9.6	8.4
Hispanic	21.8	27.9
Multiracial	1.5	4.6
Native American	3.0	1.9
Other	1.5	1.1
White	59.9	48.9
Total	100	100.0

Figure 2. Annual Household Income

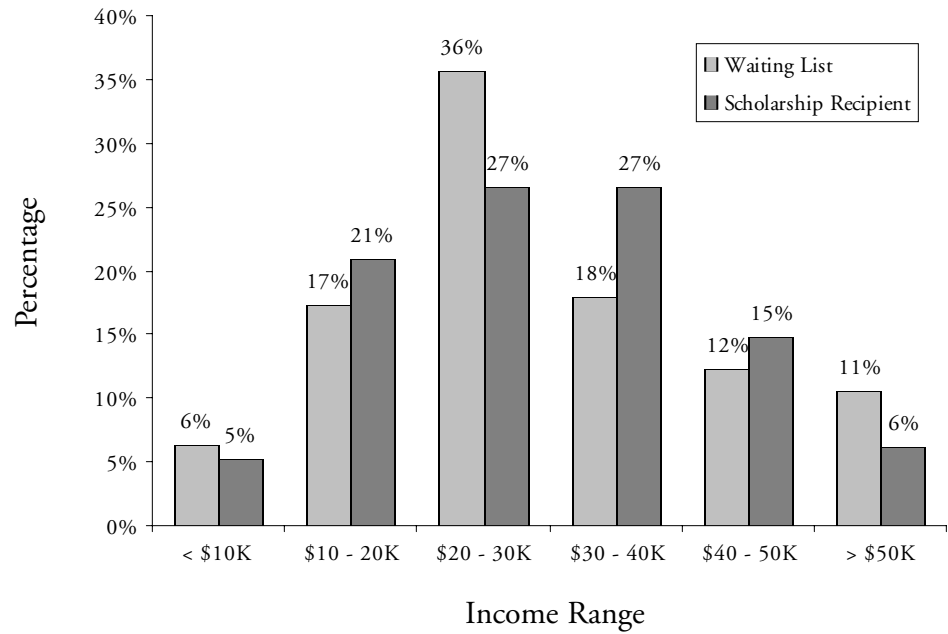
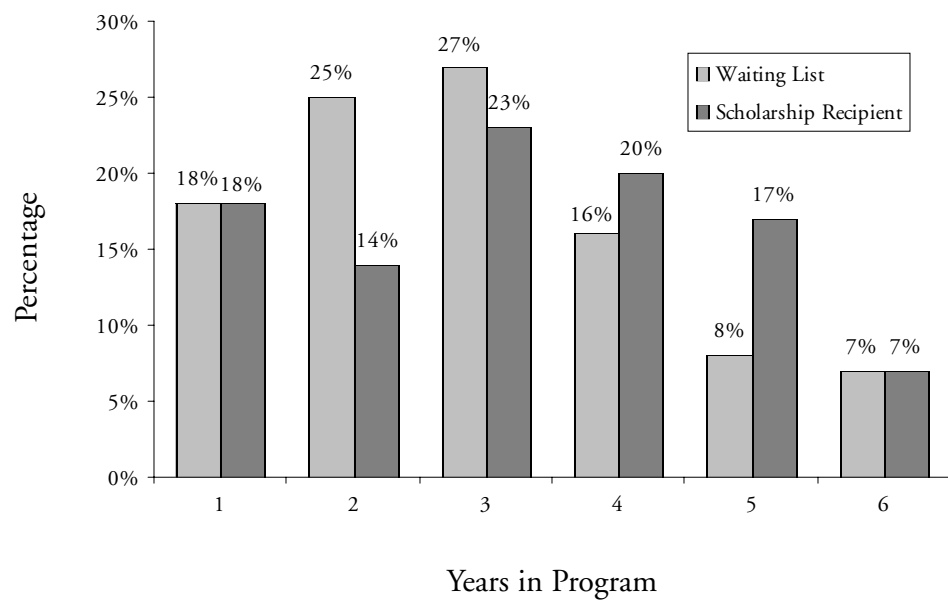


Figure 3. Years Spent in ASCT Program



or African-American. Whites were the largest segment of both groups, with Hispanics being the second largest, making up 22 percent of the scholarship recipients and 28 percent of those on the waiting list.

The data pertaining to household income, shown in Figure 2, support ASCT's estimate that the average household income of ASCT recipients was \$29,182 during the 2002-2003 school year.¹⁵ The median household income of scholarship recipient families was between \$20,000 and \$30,000. Seventy-nine percent of households earned less than \$40,000. Likewise, the median annual household income of families on the waiting list was between \$20,000 and \$30,000, with 77 percent reporting an annual household income below \$40,000. These findings suggest that the median income of ASCT families is approximately 30 percent below the median for the state of Arizona, which according to the U.S. Census Bureau was \$41,554 in 2002.¹⁶

Experiences in the Scholarship Program

Both sets of parents were asked questions regarding their time in the ASCT program, their children's current and past schools, and the financial costs of their children's schooling.

The responses of both those who have been receiving scholarships and those on the waiting list demonstrate that most families have been involved with ASCT for several years. As Figure 3 shows, approximately 67 percent of the

scholarship recipients who completed the survey have been in the program longer than two years, and seven percent of the scholarship recipient families reported being in the program since 1998. Only 18 percent were new scholarship recipients in 2003.

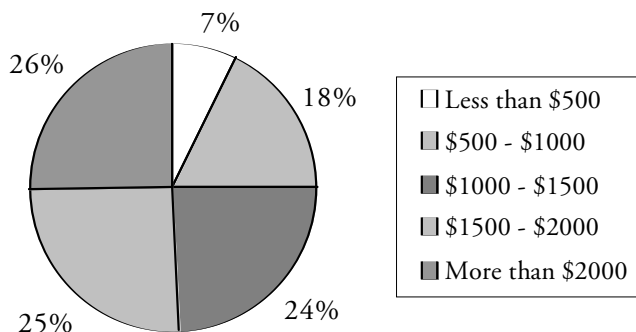
Similarly, 56 percent of the responding families on the waiting list have spent three or more years on the waiting list. Only 17 percent have been on the waiting list for less than one year, while 14 percent have been on the waiting list for more than five years.

The surveys sent to scholarship recipients asked about the amounts of the scholarships they received from ASCT; their responses confirm the estimate provided by ASCT that the average scholarship for 2003-2004 was \$1,581.¹⁷ Figure 4 shows only 25.6 percent of respondents received scholarships worth more than \$2,000. Half of the ASCT scholarship recipients received scholarships worth less than \$1,500.

Nearly half – 46 percent – of the scholarship recipient respondents reported receiving additional financial aid above the amount of the ASCT scholarship. However, even with that additional financial aid, those families still had to make significant financial contributions of their own in order to send their children to private school. Two-thirds of respondents paid more than \$1,000 out of pocket, with 30 percent paying more than \$2,000.

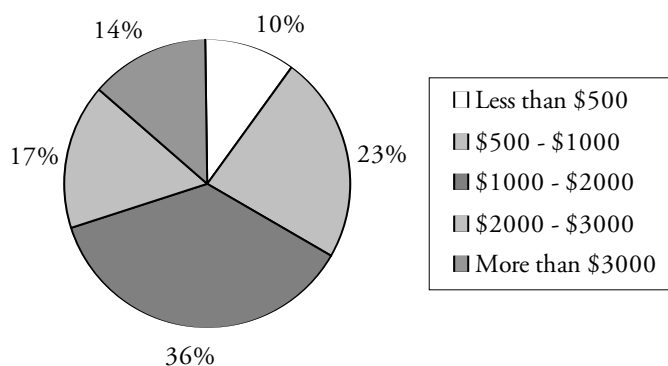
The median household income of scholarship recipient families was between \$20,000 and \$30,000. Seventy-nine percent of households earned less than \$40,000. Likewise, the median annual household income of families on the waiting list was between \$20,000 and \$30,000, with 77 percent reporting an annual household income below \$40,000.

Figure 4. Amounts of ASCT Scholarships



Fifty-six percent of the responding families on the waiting list have spent three or more years on the waiting list. Only 17 percent have been on the waiting list for less than one year, while 14 percent have been on the waiting list for more than five years.

Figure 5. Tuition Co-Payments Made by ASCT Scholarship Recipients



Scholarship recipients reported that the ASCT scholarships were integral to affording private school. Only 14 percent reported that they would likely be able to remain in private school without the help of the ASCT scholarship.

Scholarship recipients were asked about the schools that their children had attended before receiving ASCT scholarships. As Figure 6 shows, 43 percent of scholarship recipients had

previously been enrolled in private school. Thirty-six percent had been enrolled in publicly financed schools – 31 percent from public schools and five percent from charter schools. Eleven percent had been homeschooled, while 10 percent did not indicate a prior school, suggesting that the child may not have been enrolled in any level of school during the prior year.

This information about where students were enrolled before receiving a

Figure 6. Scholarship Recipient Students by Type of School, Prior to Scholarship

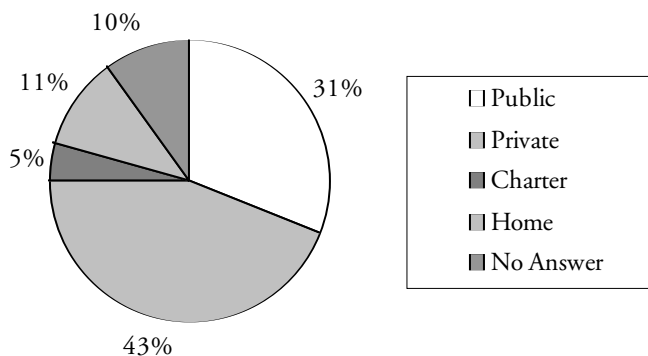
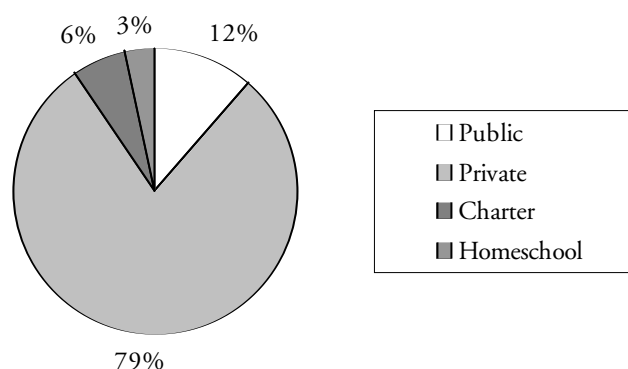


Figure 7. Waiting List Students by Current School Type



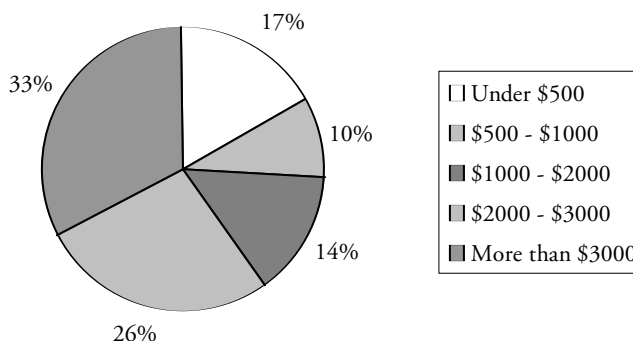
The responses received from the parents of waiting list students in publicly financed schools are particularly important for our analysis. Those parents wish to exercise school choice, but have been unable to because of financial constraints.

scholarship suggests it is unlikely that 86 percent of scholarship recipients would actually send their children back to public school if the ASCT scholarships ceased to exist. However, it is notable that those families consider ASCT critical to their ability to send their children to the schools of their choice.

In addition, the survey asked waiting list families where their children were currently attending school, and found that the great majority – 79 percent –

were enrolled in private school, as shown in Figure 7. Eighteen percent had students enrolled in publicly funded schools – either traditional public schools (11.5 percent) or charter schools (6.2 percent). The responses received from the parents of waiting list students in publicly financed schools are particularly important for our analysis. Those parents wish to exercise school choice, but have been unable to because of financial constraints. Examining their level of satisfaction with their children’s

Figure 8. Tuition Paid by Waiting List Families, by Percentage



Waiting list respondents whose children were enrolled in private school pay an average tuition between \$2,000 and \$3,000. Thirty-three percent pay more than \$3,000 – a considerable sum given that the median income is between \$20,000 and \$30,000 annually.

schools provides important information about the impact of additional programs that would allow those families to exercise choice.

The 79 percent of waiting list respondents whose children were enrolled in private school were asked how much they paid in private school tuition. As indicated in Figure 8, families on the waiting list pay an average tuition between \$2,000 and \$3,000. Thirty-three percent pay more than \$3,000 – a considerable sum given that the median income is between \$20,000 and \$30,000 annually. It is important to note that waiting list children in private schools were also asked if they received additional financial aid. Fifty-three percent of the waiting list families indicated that they received some form of financial aid.

Parental Satisfaction

Scholarship recipient and waiting list families were asked the same five questions about their satisfaction with

their current school environments, grading each factor on a scale from A to F. The factors were:

- Quality of academic instruction
- Quality of teacher attention to child
- The curriculum reflects family’s values
- The school fosters parental involvement
- Overall school experience

In this section, not only are we able to compare the relative parental satisfaction of scholarship recipients and waiting list students, but we can also compare the relative satisfaction of different kinds of waiting list parents – those currently exercising private school choice (enrolled in private school) with those currently not exercising private school choice (enrolled in public or charter schools).

As shown in Table 5, those receiving scholarships are more satisfied with their children’s schools. For example, Figure 9

Figure 9. Grade on Overall School Experience

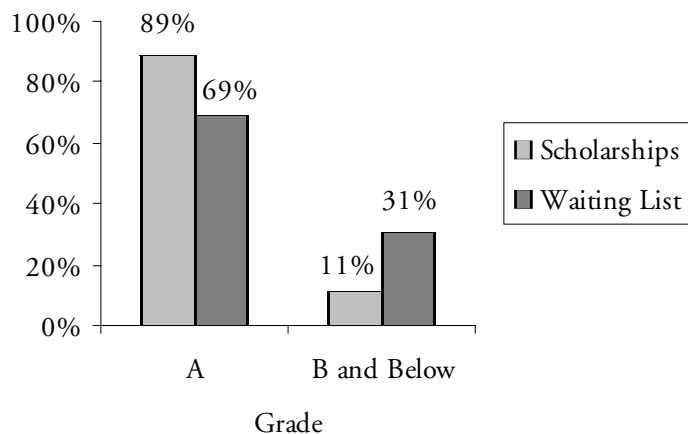


Table 5. Parental Assessment of Children’s Schools (percent)

GRADE:	A		B		C		D		F	
	Scholar-ship	Wait List	Scholar-ship	Wait List	Scholar-ship	Wait List	Scholar-ship	Wait List	Scholar-ship	Wait List
Quality of academic instruction	86	72	12	18	2	10	0	1	0	0
Quality of teacher attention to child	84	69	14	19	2	9	0	2	0	1
Curriculum reflects family’s values	91	75	9	12	1	6	0	3	0	4
School fosters parental involvement	89	73	8	14	2	8	1	2	0	2
Overall school experience	89	69	9	19	1	8	1	3	0	1

shows 89 percent of those using scholarships gave the overall school experience an A, while just 69 percent of those on the waiting list gave the overall experience an A.

Eighty-nine percent of those using scholarships gave the overall school experience an A, while just 69 percent of those on the waiting list gave the overall experience an A. Only 15 percent of those on the waiting list with students in public or charter schools gave their overall school experience an A.

However, the difference in satisfaction with schools becomes more dramatic when examining the responses of those children on the waiting list who were unable to find an alternative method of financing private school and had to return to public or charter schools. Only 15 percent of those on the waiting list with students in public or charter schools gave their overall school experience an A.

Interestingly, as shown in Figure 11, satisfaction is higher among those waiting list parents who send their children to charter schools – those who were able to exercise some school choice

– than among those with children in traditional public school. This suggests that parents who can exercise a modest level of choice are more satisfied with their children’s schooling.

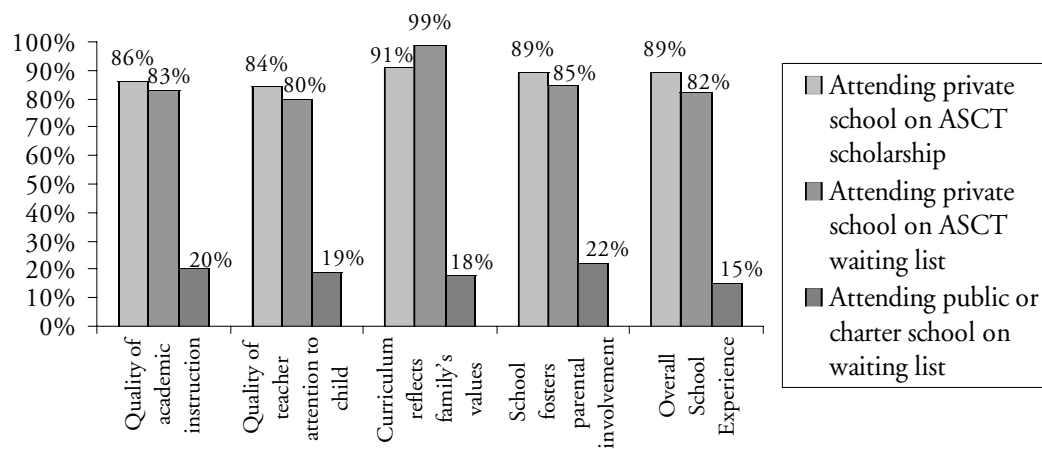
Median Grades

The percentage of parents giving their children’s schools an A is only one way to consider parental satisfaction. It is also important to consider the median grade to fully understand parents’ true feelings toward their children’s schools. It is interesting that the median grade given by those exercising private school choice was an A, while the parents of children enrolled in public and charter schools gave their children’s schools median grades of C and B, respectively. Once again, the difference between the grades given by charter school and public school parents suggests that

Table 6. Median Grades by School Type and Ability to Exercise School Choice

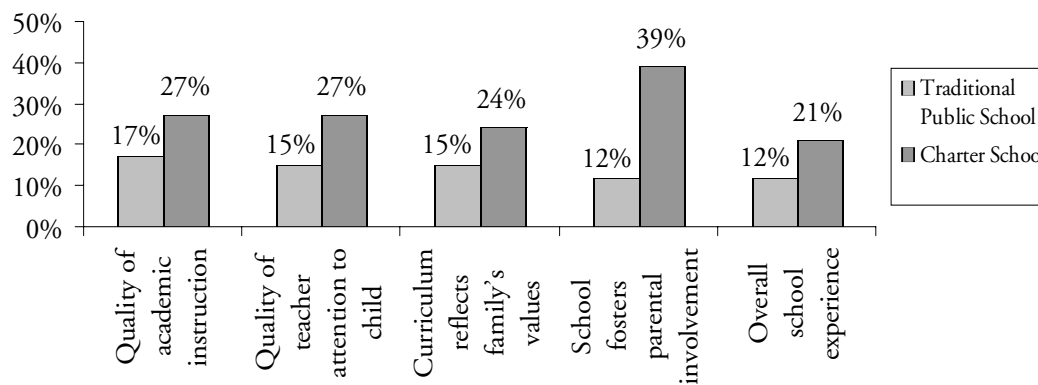
	Quality of academic instruction	Quality of teacher attention to child	Curriculum reflects family’s values	School fosters parental involvement	Overall school experience
Scholarship Recipients Private School	A	A	A	A	A
Waiting List Private School	A	A	A	A	A
Waiting List Charter School	B	B	B	B	B
Waiting List Public School	C	C	C	C	C

Figure 10. Percentage of Respondents Giving their Schools A's



Satisfaction is higher among those waiting list parents who send their children to charter schools – those who were able to exercise some school choice – than among those with children in traditional public school.

Figure 11. Percentage of Traditional Public School Students and Charter School Students Giving their Schools A's



exercising even limited choice – picking a charter school in this case – increases parental satisfaction.

A closer examination of the scores for each of the five questions reveals that parents were most concerned about whether the curriculum reflected the family’s values. Seventeen percent of the waiting list families with students in charter schools gave their children’s schools a D or F for curriculum reflecting the family’s values. A significantly higher percentage of the waiting list families with children in public school expressed their dissatisfaction with their schools’ curricula, with 47 percent giving a score of D or F.

Although it is important to consider

the relatively small sample size used to generate these figures, the data suggest that satisfaction is generally higher among low-income parents who are able to exercise school choice.

Parental Involvement

Both surveys asked the same four questions regarding parental involvement. As shown in Table 7, there is little discernable difference between the level of involvement of scholarship recipients and those on the waiting list. However, parents with children in private schools have slightly more contact with their children’s schools than parents whose children attend public school.

It is important to remember that all of these parents have exhibited a great

A closer examination of the scores for each of the five questions reveals that parents were most concerned about whether the curriculum reflected the family’s values.

Table 7. Parental Involvement in Schools

	Average school visits per month	Average times volunteered per month	Average times talked to teacher per month	Refused or ignored when contacting teacher (percent)
Scholarship Recipients	9.3	3.9	6.8	.5
Waiting List (All)	9.3	3.8	6.4	3.4
Waiting List Private School	10	4.3	6.6	.01
Waiting List Public School	6.0	2	4.6	16.4
Waiting List Charter School	6.6	1	6.8	9

level of interest in their children's educations simply by applying for private school scholarships. Nevertheless, we can still learn from the data. For example, parents of children enrolled in private school reported visiting and volunteering at their children's private schools and talking to their children's teachers more frequently than did parents with children in public school. These findings seem to suggest that the difference is not with the parents, but with the schools, indicating that private schools generally encourage more involvement than public schools.

Opinions Regarding School Choice in Arizona

Both sets of parents were asked five questions about their knowledge and

opinion of school choice in Arizona. More than 90 percent said they would support additional school choice programs such as a corporate scholarship tax credit or a scholarship voucher program.

Both groups are well aware of the tax credit available to those who contribute to the program. As would be expected, less than thirty percent of these families have been able to donate, as their participation in the ASCT program indicates their modest incomes. Interestingly, families on the waiting list were slightly more likely to make donations than families on scholarship. Approximately three quarters of both groups report having encouraged others to make tax credit donations.

Parents of children enrolled in private school reported visiting and volunteering at their children's private schools and talking to their children's teachers more frequently than did parents with children in public school.

Table 8. Opinions on School Choice in Arizona (percent)

	Scholarship Recipients		Waiting List	
	Yes	No ^a	Yes	No ^a
Familiar with Scholarship Tax Credit Program	92.4	7.6	82.7	17.7
Have made a tax credit donation to ASCT or other STO	21.2	78.8	29.7	70.3
Have encouraged others to make tax credit donations	78.8	21.2	70.1	29.9
Would support additional scholarship tax credit program for corporate donations	98.0	2.0	93.8	6.2
Would support a voucher program to allow parents to purchase private school tuition	94.4	5.6	89.9	10.1

^aAlso included in "No" responses were those who did not report an answer.

Other Findings

The survey asked ASCT scholarship recipient parents additional questions about the private school experience in Arizona and their opinions about the administration of the ASCT program.

Testing and Accountability

Seventy-nine percent of the ASCT scholarship recipient families reported that their children's private schools required an annual standardized exam. Seventy-three percent reported that they were informed of their children's scores on that standardized exam. Fifty-four percent were able to specify the name of the standardized exam their child was required to take, with the vast majority indicating either the Stanford 9 exam or the Iowa Basic Skills Test. (Other responses included the SAT, the PSAT, and the ACT exams.)

Transportation

The survey asked scholarship recipient parents to answer three questions regarding how their children were transported to school. First, parents were asked how far their children's schools were from home. The average answer was 7.8 miles. Yet only 31 percent of the responding parents reported that transportation was a serious challenge to their private school experience. Half of the responding families identified how their children were transported to school, with the vast majority using driving or carpooling as the preferred method of transportation.

Reasons for Applying to ASCT

Parents were asked to mark which factors affected their choice of school. The factor most frequently cited was a curriculum that reflected the family's values. Other popular reasons included improved academics, school safety, better teachers, and smaller classes. A less frequently cited reason was special services.

Opinions Regarding ASCT Program Administration

Parents of scholarship recipients were asked to grade ASCT program administration on four factors. The answers suggest that the overwhelming majority is satisfied with all aspects of the ASCT program administration. Not surprisingly, the satisfaction level corresponded to the size of the scholarship awarded. Nevertheless, more than 93 percent of the respondents gave their overall satisfaction with the ASCT program an A.

ASCT scholarship recipient parents were also asked two questions regarding financial assistance. Ninety-six percent of respondents said they would benefit from additional scholarship assistance, and 24 percent said they were in danger of pulling their children out of private school due to financial considerations despite the ASCT scholarship.

Optional Parent Testimonial Information

The survey invited both sets of parents to write descriptions of their

Seventy-nine percent of the ASCT scholarship recipient families reported that their children's private schools required an annual standardized exam. Seventy-three percent reported that they were informed of their children's scores on that standardized exam.

Table 9. Factors Affecting ASCT Scholarship Recipients' Choice of Schools

Reason	Yes %
School curriculum reflects family's values	92.4
Improved academics	89.4
Better teachers	85.4
Smaller classes	83.8
School safety	73.7
Special services	53.0

Table 10. Scholarship Recipient Families' Satisfaction with ASCT Program Administration, by Percentage

	A	B	C	D	F	No answer
Satisfaction with ASCT program administration	94	3	1	0	1	2
Satisfaction with communication/ assistance from ASCT	88	9	1	0	1	2
Satisfaction with amount awarded in scholarship	82	11	3	1	2	2
Overall satisfaction with scholarship program	93	4	1	1	0	2

A married parent earning less than \$30,000 per year writes, "I am very grateful for the ASCT scholarship. It makes it possible for my daughter to attend a good private school . . . I also appreciate the fact that we parents are responsible for at least 25% of the tuition, that gives us a sense of accomplishment in the education as well."

experiences with the ASCT program, which helped to personalize the statistics of the scholarship program. Waiting list families described their reasons for applying for scholarships, and more than 20 percent of scholarship recipient parents wrote about how the scholarship program has helped their children. Their handwritten responses provide a glimpse into the lives of the families impacted by this program.

Scholarship Recipients

Responses from scholarship recipient parents reveal not only how

much they value the opportunity to choose schools for their children, but also how dedicated and willing they are to make significant sacrifices for their children's educations. Below are some sample responses:

A single parent of three earning less than \$30,000 per year, whose child transferred from public to private school, writes:

You have helped me in providing an excellent education for my children. I have been working hard to keep my children from being "throw

away” children – I thank God for your help.

A married parent earning less than \$30,000 per year writes:

I am very grateful for the ASCT scholarship. It makes it possible for my daughter to attend a good private school . . . I also appreciate the fact that we parents are responsible for at least 25% of the tuition, that gives us a sense of accomplishment in the education as well.

A divorced parent earning less than \$10,000 a year writes:

My kindergarten son is in a safe and nurturing environment at his school. If it were not for the scholarship he would have to go to a much larger neighborhood public school. His teachers and playground monitors know who he is, how he is doing, and where he is at all times.

A married parent earning less than \$20,000 a year, paying a tuition co-payment of \$1,000 to help transfer her child from public to private school writes:

Two of my children will go to the math Olympics. I am proud of my 4 children and I thank you for making this possible. I [will] tell them to give money to this program or the program that will exist after they

become professionals to give a chance to other poor children like they were once.

A married parent whose child had been homeschooled writes:

We are so grateful that ASCT provided scholarships for families like ours with a low income of \$24,000 a year. If we didn't get this help from ASCT our son would not be close to graduating at this great schools he's in. We've had our difficult financial struggles to pay our portion on a monthly basis, but we never thought of withdrawing our child.

Waiting List Families

As one would expect, the consistent theme throughout the optional responses provided by waiting list families was an expression of the inability or difficulty in affording private school tuition. Many parents cited rising tuition costs, unemployment or lack of income, and high medical costs as reasons for difficulty in affording private school tuition. Some wrote of their inability to afford housing near better schools. Many parents discussed their great satisfaction with their children's private schools and their strong desire to keep their children enrolled. A final common theme was the importance of values-based religious education, as many parents expressed their desire for their children to receive a religious

A separated parent earning less than \$20,000 who sends her child to private school writes, "I find it hard to make ends meet financially and my son is a follower and I would hate to put him in a public school where he has a hard time staying focused. He used to get D's and F's, now he gets B's and C's."

education. Some examples:

A single mother whose children attend private school writes:

I am applying for a scholarship to offset some of the costs of tuition. I am a divorced single parent. We live on social security/disability. We struggle monthly to meet every bill. We do not receive child support. There is not any other school for my children . . . I would not send them anywhere else. I will do whatever it takes to keep them in [their] school.

A separated parent earning less than \$20,000 who sends her child to private school writes:

I find it hard to make ends meet financially and my son is a follower and I would hate to put him in a public school where he has a hard time staying focused. He used to get D's and F's, now he gets B's and C's.

A parent of a public school student earning less than \$30,000 a year writes:

I am a single mom of two boys and I cannot afford better education or rent for an area [with] a better school. My son gets bored and is unchallenged in his current school.

A married parent of three earning less than \$30,000 a year writes:

Thanks to ASCT other families that have less income have the privilege to attend private schools.

The responses of ASCT waiting list families provide one general impression: parents on the waiting list, from all throughout Arizona and from all walks of life, are trying to provide the best opportunities for their children and often face considerable challenges in the process.

Does School Choice Really Boost Parental Satisfaction?

Perhaps the most notable and controversial finding of this survey is that parents who exercise private school choice – either with the benefit of an ASCT scholarship, with other financial aid, or by making serious financial sacrifices – are generally more satisfied than parents who cannot exercise such choices. Specifically, parents with children enrolled in private schools gave a grade of A to their children's schools, while the median grades given to charter schools and traditional public schools were B and C, respectively.

There are a few reasons to be cautious about these findings. First, it is logical to assume that there was significant self-selection in these data samples – those parents who have applied for scholarships have already demonstrated some level of dissatisfaction with their children's current school experience. Second, the relatively small sample size prevents drawing broad conclusions.

Nevertheless, existing research from

Perhaps the most notable and controversial finding of this survey is that parents who exercise private school choice – either with the benefit of an ASCT scholarship, with other financial aid, or by making serious financial sacrifices – are generally more satisfied than parents who cannot exercise such choices.

Table 11. Parental Satisfaction by School Type: 1999, by Percentage

School Type	Very satisfied with school	Very satisfied with teachers	Very satisfied with academic standards	Very satisfied with order and discipline
Public, assigned	48	54	53	54
Public, chosen	62	62	63	63
Private, church-related	80	76	81	87
Private, secular	76	75	79	80

Source: Parent survey of National Household Education Survey Program (NHES) 1999, U.S. Department of Education, National Center of Education Statistics.
 Note: Figures do not include standard error.

University of Wisconsin professor John Witte acknowledges an emerging consensus in school choice research: “There’s one very consistent finding: Parental involvement is very positive, and parental satisfaction is very positive. . . . Parents are happier.”

outside Arizona gives us reason to believe that school choice does indeed boost parental satisfaction. A May 2003 U.S. Department of Education report, *Trends in the Use of School Choice: 1993 to 1999*, found that “Parents whose children attended either public, chosen schools or private schools were more likely to say they were very satisfied with their children’s schools, teachers, academic standards, and order and discipline than were parents whose children attended public, assigned schools.”¹⁸ The department’s finding that the parents in chosen public schools are generally more satisfied than parents with children in assigned public schools corroborates our survey findings.

While researchers have yet to reach a consensus on how parent-centered education reforms impact academic achievement, there is widespread agreement that school choice programs boost parental satisfaction. University of

Wisconsin professor John Witte, who has issued reports critical of researchers who argue that school choice leads to academic improvement, acknowledges an emerging consensus in school choice research: “There’s one very consistent finding: Parental involvement is very positive, and parental satisfaction is very positive. . . . Parents are happier.”¹⁹

Indeed, a survey of the research on school choice and parental satisfaction confirms Witte’s assertion. For example, a study of Washington, D.C. families receiving privately funded school choice scholarships found higher satisfaction levels among parents who exercised school choice: 46 percent of scholarship parents gave their schools an A, while only 15 percent of public school parents gave their schools an A.²⁰ A similar study in Charlotte, N.C., found that 53 percent of scholarship parents gave their schools top ratings, while just 26 percent of public school parents gave their

schools the same rating.²¹

Higher levels of parental satisfaction are also found in school choice programs for students with disabilities. In 2003, the Manhattan Institute surveyed parents participating in Florida's McKay scholarship program for students with disabilities and found that 92.7 percent of parents were satisfied or very satisfied with their children's schools, compared to just 32.7 percent of public school parents.²²

Limitations of the Survey Data and Opportunities for Further Research

It is important to consider the factors that could have affected or skewed the data compiled from the survey. Although the survey was accompanied by a letter from ASCT assuring families that their input would not affect their standing with ASCT or their children's potential to receive scholarships, it is possible that parents may have assumed that their answers would be transmitted to ASCT and would affect their prospects for receiving assistance. This would create a bias in the responses: parents currently receiving scholarships may overstate their satisfaction and involvement with their children's schools, and those on the waiting list may overstate their dissatisfaction.

It is also possible that those choosing to respond to the survey had the strongest opinions – positive and negative. For example, a parent of a scholarship recipient whose life had been

dramatically improved by the ability to switch to a private school would likely be more motivated to respond than a parent whose child's life had not been altered by the scholarship. Likewise, a waiting list family that is satisfied with its current arrangement might be less likely to respond than a waiting list family desperate to remove its child from a school it feels is failing to provide a good education.

Arizona's various school choice programs offer researchers numerous opportunities for additional studies. Similar studies of parental satisfaction could focus on other scholarship organizations, and include private, charter, and public school populations. Expanding the pool of recipients would help draw stronger conclusions regarding parental satisfaction, as well as clarify and expand on the comparisons drawn in this study.

Conclusion

The Arizona School Choice Trust program provided an opportunity to study the impact that scholarships have on families in Arizona. My research revealed that scholarship recipient parents and waiting list parents had similar characteristics, and shared a desire to choose schools for their children to provide their children with better educations. Overall, the survey findings suggest that parents who are able to exercise more school choice are generally more satisfied with their

More than 80 percent of parents exercising private school choice gave their schools an overall satisfaction rating of A, whereas less than 20 percent of families with children in public or charter schools expressed equal satisfaction.

children's education environments.

Additional findings include:

Background Information

- The median income for all responding families was between \$20,000 and \$30,000, corresponding to ASCT's estimate that the average family income was \$29,182 in 2002-2003, which is 30 percent below the median income for the state of Arizona.
- Sixty percent of scholarship recipients and 49 percent of waiting list families are white. Hispanics were the largest minority group represented, with 22 percent of the scholarship recipient population and 28 percent of the waiting list population.

Time in ASCT Program

- Two-thirds of scholarship recipient families have been in the ASCT program for more than one year, and seven percent of scholarship recipients have been on scholarship since 1998.
- Fifty-six percent of waiting list families have spent three or more years on the waiting list. Fourteen percent have been on the waiting list for more than five years.

Scholarship Tuition Payments

- Only 26 percent of scholarship recipients received a scholarship of more than \$2,000. Half of the ASCT scholarship recipients received less than \$1,500. Two-thirds of scholarship recipient

families paid more than \$1,000 out of pocket for tuition co-payments, with 30 percent paying more than \$2,000. Thirty-six percent of scholarship recipients had been enrolled in public or charter schools.

- Only 14 percent of scholarship recipients believed they would be able to remain in private school without the help of the ASCT scholarship.
- Seventy-nine percent of waiting list families were already enrolled in private school, with the majority paying between \$2,000 and \$3,000 annually in tuition. Nineteen percent of waiting list students were enrolled in either traditional public or charter schools.

Parental Satisfaction

- More than 80 percent of parents exercising private school choice gave their schools an overall satisfaction rating of A, whereas less than 20 percent of families with children in public or charter schools expressed equal satisfaction.
- The median parental satisfaction grade for private schools was an A, while charter schools and public schools scored median grades of B and C, respectively.

Parental Involvement

- School choice did not appear to significantly boost parental involvement, though scholarship recipients with children in private schools reported visiting and volunteering at their children's private schools and talking to their children's teachers

The survey findings suggest that a significant number of Arizona families with income below \$30,000 is benefiting from school choice policies.

more frequently than did parents with children in public school.

Opinion on School Choice in Arizona

- More than 90 percent of all responding parents would support either a corporate scholarship tax credit or a scholarship voucher program.

Private School Experience

- The most frequently cited reason (92.4 percent) for applying for a scholarship was to find a school curriculum that reflected the parents' values. More than 80 percent of scholarship recipient families also cited improved academics, better teachers, and smaller class sizes as reasons for applying for scholarships.
- Seventy-nine percent of scholarship recipients reported that their children's private schools required an annual standardized exam.
- Only 31 percent of responding parents reported that transportation was a serious challenge to their private school experience.

While the survey of ASCT program participants only provides a glimpse into the feelings of the entire Arizona student population, the survey findings suggest that a significant number of Arizona families with income below \$30,000 is benefiting from school choice policies. Similarly, many more low-income families wish to participate and believe that their children would be better off if they had the opportunity to choose different schools.

NOTES

1. Dan Lips, personal interview with Jack and Isabelle McVaugh, October 21, 2003, and subsequent email and fax correspondence, October and November 2003.
2. Other founders include Ralph and Nancy Knight and Tom Rouse. The McVaughs mention that many individuals have supported ASCT over the past decade.
3. *Digest of Education Statistics 1999*, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C., January 2000, Table 62, <<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2000/digest99/tables/PDF/Table062.pdf>>
4. Tara Ellman, "Arizona School Choice Trust – A Survey of Participating Families," Arizona Issue Analysis no. 138, Goldwater Institute, January 1996, <<http://www.goldwaterinstitute.org/pdf/materials/125.pdf>>
5. "Scholarship donors can get \$500 tax credit in Arizona," *Washington Times*, April 8, 1997.
6. Sydney Hoff Hay, "Competing for a good education," *Washington Times*, May 8, 1997.
7. Information obtained from the Arizona Department of Revenue as of October 1, 2003.
8. For a complete history on recent events in Arizona school choice, see Krista Kafer, "School Choice 2003: How States Are Providing Greater Opportunity In Education," Heritage Foundation, 2003, <<http://www.heritage.org/Research/Education/Schools/arizona.cfm>>.
9. Arizona School Choice Trust "Board & Friends Update," August 1, 2003, vol. 1, no. 8.
10. Email correspondence with Isabelle McVaugh, October 28, 2003. Email correspondence with ASCT chairman Tom Rouse, November 18, 2003. The decline in the number of scholarships awarded was due to an increase in the number of funds that were designated for use at particular private schools, and the schools' delay in identifying eligible students to receive donations for the current school year.
11. Dan Lips, personal interview and email correspondence with Jack and Isabelle McVaugh, October 24, 2003.
12. Data provided by ASCT for the Goldwater Institute's "School Tuition Organization Survey, August 2003."
13. Carrie Lips and Jennifer Jacoby, "The Arizona Scholarship Tax Credit: Giving Parents Choices, Saving Taxpayers Money," Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 414, September 2001, <<http://www.cato.org/pubs/pas/pa414.pdf>>; Ralph G. Neas, "A Model to Avoid: Arizona's Tuition Tax Credit Law," People for the American Way Foundation, September 2001, <http://www.pfaw.org/pfaw/dfiles/file_67>

- .pdf>; Glen Wilson, "Effects on Funding Equity of the Arizona Tax Credit Law," Arizona State University, Education Policy Analysis Archive, August 1, 2000, <<http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v8n38.html>>
14. Ellman, "Arizona School Choice Trust – A Survey of Participating Families."
15. ASCT "Board & Friends Update."
16. "Income in the United States: 2002," U.S. Census Bureau, September 2003, <<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income02.html>>
17. McVaugh email, October 28, 2003.
18. *Trends in the Use of School Choice: 1993 to 1999*, U. S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Table 3, <<http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2003031>>.
19. "Parental Satisfaction with School Choice," Institute for Justice, August 2003, <http://www.ij.org/cases/school/facts/dc_choice/parents_like_choice.pdf>.
20. William C. Howell and Paul Peterson, "School Choice in Washington, DC: An Evaluation after One Year," Program on Education Policy and Governance, Harvard University, March 2000, <<http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/pepg/>>.
21. Jay Greene, "The Effect of School Choice: an Evaluation of the Charlotte Children's Scholarship Fund," Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, August 2000, <http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_12a.htm#h1>
22. Jay Greene, "Vouchers for Special Education Students: An Evaluation of Florida's McKay Scholarship Program," Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, June 2003, <http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_38.htm>

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