

A Parent's Guide to School Choice



**Education Options
for Arizona Families**



The Choice is Yours

School Options for Arizona Families

When it comes to education, parents in Arizona have more choices than parents in almost any other state. Navigating these choices can be overwhelming, so the Goldwater Institute offers this guide for families as they choose a school or a set of services for their children.

Why choose?

Any parent can tell you that no two children are alike. They learn in different ways and at different paces. Some love to read, others are great at math. Some need extra help from their teachers, and some like to learn on their own. The idea that the exact same school and classroom setup will work for every child just doesn't match up with what parents already know: *each child is unique*.

Arizona families have the ability to handpick the schools, classes, and even extracurricular learning activities that will best meet their children's needs. From charter schools offering online classes to Montessori schools allowing children to learn at their own pace, and from private schools to homeschooling, more choices are available today than ever before.

In Arizona parents have the freedom to choose the schools that will challenge their children and prepare them for the future. Every child deserves an excellent education.

We hope this guide helps you understand your options and how to select the best choice for your child's needs.

Open Enrollment

Arizona's open enrollment law allows children to attend any public school, regardless of school boundaries. Parents and students choose a school and fill out enrollment documents during the application period. Schools admit students from outside the district, if they have room.

School Shopping: *Tera, Stone & Bailey*

Tera's experience choosing a school for her children is typical of the process for most Arizona families using open enrollment.

"I learned a little bit about each school and looked up things online about them. You look for the things that will be the best fit for your son or daughter," she says. "It wasn't difficult at all. The paperwork is all online," she explains.

Tera didn't get her first choice of school for her son, Stone, last year, but she did this year.

Her school shopping consisted mainly of talking with friends who have children already in schools she was considering and asking about their experiences. Once she completed the application for her school of choice and returned it to the school's office, they contacted her when space was available.

➡ **Once parents have been told whether room is available, many schools require parents to contact the district office with their enrollment decision. Check with your school for more details.**

What to Do:

- ➡ **Compare traditional or charter public schools** on sites like www.azed.gov (under "Find a School") or www.greatschools.org. Review comments from other parents, school descriptions, and test scores on these websites to find the best fit for your child.
- ➡ **Call, visit the website, or take a tour** of your preferred school. Most schools have application and enrollment information online. All school districts must post open enrollment information on their website.
- ➡ **Find out when the open enrollment period opens and closes.** Usually, open enrollment begins in October and ends in December or January. Complete an application and return it to the school's office or contact the school's district office for more information.

Schools and school districts post applications on the web, or parents may pick up forms at a school's office. Many districts require completed applications to be returned to the district office. Learn more from the district office that oversees your chosen school.

DID YOU KNOW?

All Arizona students are eligible for open enrollment, and students can enroll in any public school in the state.

Private School Scholarships

Arizona students can apply for private school scholarships awarded by school tuition organizations. Scholarships are made possible by donations from individuals and businesses. Donors receive a dollar-for-dollar credit on their taxes for their contribution.

What to Do:

- **Find a school tuition organization.** Call the Arizona School Tuition Organization Association at (480) 269-7860 or visit www.astoa.com for a list of scholarship organizations in Arizona. Find scholarship organizations at www.arizonaschoolchoice.com/EDU_PSS.html.
- **Find a private school.** Compare schools at www.azed.gov (under “Find a School”) or www.greatschools.org. Tell the scholarship organization which schools interest you and find out if they accept scholarships.
- **Ask a scholarship organization** which type of award your child is eligible for. While all students can apply for scholarships, specific opportunities exist for students with special needs, foster students, and children from low-income families. Parents or guardians of children with special needs or foster care should inquire about Lexie’s Law. Families with household incomes that fall below approximately \$42,000 a year for a family of four should ask about the Corporate Tuition Tax Credit Program.

Some scholarship organizations have a rolling application process during the year. Be sure to ask if they are still accepting applications. Most organizations send tuition payments directly to the school on the student’s behalf.



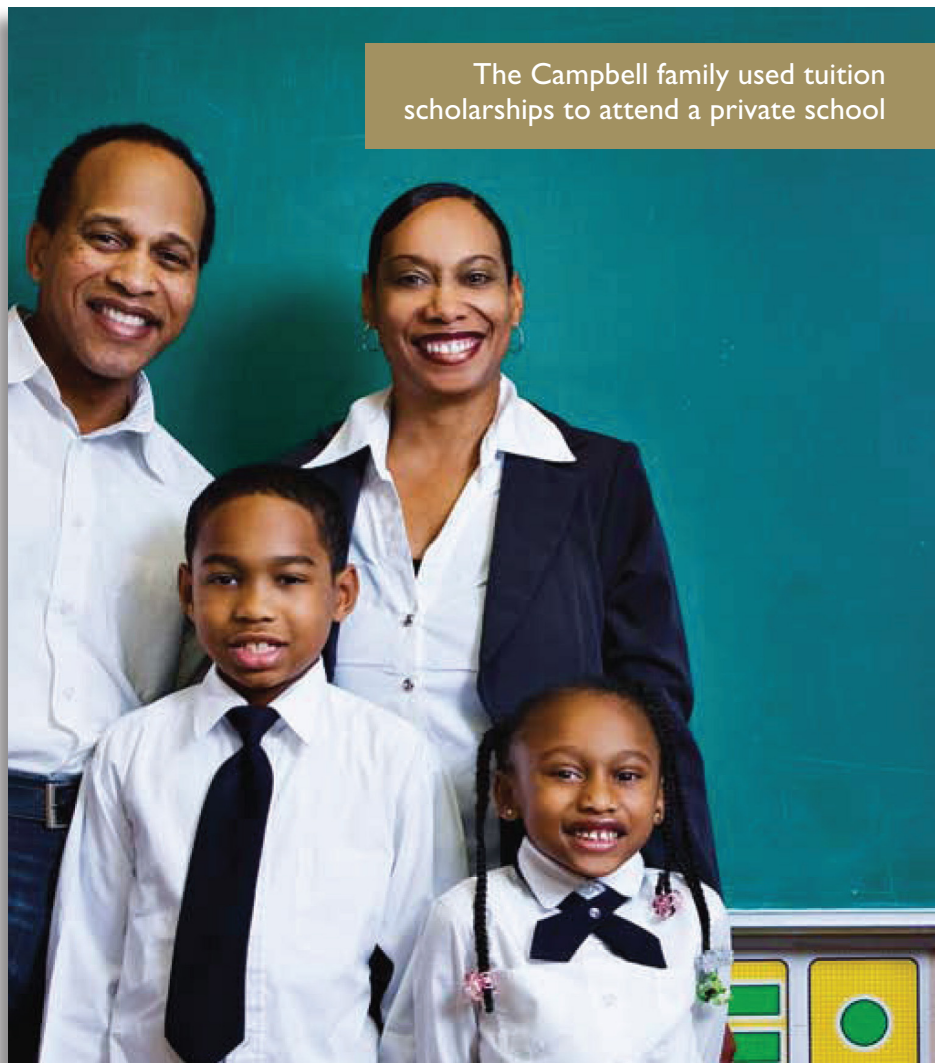
Children at Eagle Prep Charter School in Phoenix

DID YOU KNOW?

Since the scholarship program was created in 1998, more than \$444 million has been awarded to students to attend private schools.

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The Campbell family used tuition scholarships to attend a private school



Preparing for the future: *Jorge's goals*

Jorge has big plans. A senior at Glendale Christian Academy, he has set his sights on earning a degree in business management and then starting his own business. He looks forward to using his music skills one day to help underprivileged children by offering music lessons.

Jorge and his mother, Lydia, say these goals wouldn't be possible without his scholarship to attend Glendale Christian, made possible through the state's scholarship tax credit program.

For more information, visit the Goldwater Institute's "Frequently Asked Questions" page on private school scholarships, available at www.goldwaterinstitute.org/scholarships.

Empowerment Scholarship Accounts

Empowerment scholarship accounts are private bank accounts that parents use for education expenses. The State of Arizona deposits part of a child's share of education funding into the account. Parents can then use that money to pay for school tuition, online classes, tutoring, books, and other expenses. Any leftover money can be saved for college.

Finding the right fit:

Amanda & Nathan Howard

For six long years, Amanda's son, Nathan, was virtually silent. Unable to speak and struggling with other developmental challenges, Nathan was diagnosed with autism. Amanda enrolled him in a developmental preschool, followed by one year in public school. Yet she found herself still searching for anything that would draw Nathan out of his shell.

And then last fall, after enrolling Nathan in a private school using funds from an Empowerment Scholarship Account, Amanda watched Nathan point to a picture in a book and ask, "What's that?" Now it was Amanda's turn to be speechless.

The account enabled her to enroll Nathan in a school that specializes in students with autism. She noticed a difference immediately, but it wasn't until he asked an otherwise nondescript question that she truly recognized the benefit of Empowerment Scholarship Accounts. Today, Amanda uses the account funds to hire a specialized tutor to help Nathan.



Amanda and Nathan Howard use an Empowerment Scholarship Account

DID YOU KNOW?

In the 2013-14 school year, 1 out of every 5 Arizona public school students will be eligible for an Empowerment Scholarship Account.



Holland and Elias Hines use an Empowerment Scholarship Account

What to Do:

- **Check your child's eligibility.** In the 2013-14 school year, students in “D” or “F”-rated schools and districts, children with an active-duty military parent, children adopted out of the state's foster care system, and children with special needs can apply for an account. Students must currently attend a public school to qualify. Children currently attending private school are not eligible. In the 2013-14 school year, the Arizona Department of Education estimates that students from failing public schools will receive \$3,200-\$3,600 in their accounts; students with special needs will receive more.
- **View your school's report card.** Visit the Arizona Department of Education's “A-F Accountability” page at www.azed.gov/research-evaluation/a-f-accountability.
- **Apply for an account.** Go to www.azed.gov/esa or call (602) 364-1969. For more information, email the state department of education at esa@azed.gov.
- **Download a contract** from www.azed.gov/esa and note when applications are due (usually in May). Parents or guardians must sign the contract and return it to the department. Parents of students with special needs will need to submit additional documentation, including an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or Multidisciplinary Evaluation Team (MET) report.

Parents must be prepared to submit quarterly reports to the department of education, including receipts from educational purchases made using the account during that period.

For more information, visit AskAMomAZ.com

Homeschool

Arizona has one of the nation's most flexible homeschool laws.

Homeschool families do not enroll their child full-time in a traditional, charter, or private school.

Instead, children are educated at home or through a combination of home-based instruction or part-time attendance in a variety of settings. Many homeschool groups operate around the state, offering weekly or monthly classes and activities.



What to Do:

- **Fill out an Affidavit of Intent to Homeschool**, notarize and return the form to your district office with a copy of your child's birth certificate.

The affidavit is available from Arizona Families for Home Education at www.afhe.org or by calling (602) 235-2673. Forms are also available on your local school district's website. To find a directory of state school districts, visit the Arizona Department of Education's "Home Schooling Information" page at www.azed.gov/hs/. Learn more at Arizona School Choice's Homeschool information page, www.arizonaschoolchoice.com/EDU_HS.html.

- **Join a homeschool group** and meet others teaching their children at home. Attend weekly meetings or receive helpful tips over email. Visit www.afhe.org/resources_support_groups.html for a list of groups.
- **Get more information** on teaching materials, local and national conferences, and how to get started from the Homeschooling Legal Defense Association at www.hsllda.org or (540) 338-5600. Also visit their "You Can Homeschool" page, available at www.hsllda.org/earlyyears/StartHere.asp.

Arizona homeschool students are not required to take state tests and they are not subject to other public school curriculum requirements.



DID YOU KNOW? Approximately 2 million children are homeschooled in the U.S. and 22,500 students are homeschooled in Arizona.



Teaching at Home:

Todd, Andrea, Jesse, Caitlin, Luke, & Conall

Todd, a public school English teacher, and Andrea, a former teacher, know the value of a good education. When it came time to decide how to teach their four children, they considered several choices.

“We’ve both been in the public school system and went to public schools ourselves. We decided that we would be able to educate our own children more efficiently than the public system can,” Todd says.

Their children can move at their own pace, and Todd and Andrea have high expectations for all their children. Jesse, age 11, excels at math and is already two-to-three grades ahead of her peers in traditional schools.

“We can address specific needs for each of our children, both their educational needs and behavioral,” Todd explains. He anticipates all his children will be taking courses at the local community college by ages 15 or 16.

“There are a lot of resources and homeschooling communities in Arizona,” he says, “and more opportunities than any one family could ever take full advantage of.”



Jordan Visser uses an Empowerment Scholarship Account

Online or “Virtual” Schools

Online schools come in many varieties. Some offer full-time instruction delivered via the internet for free, while others charge tuition. Arizona also has one of the nation’s first—and most successful—hybrid schools. There, students spend some of the day at the school’s computer lab working online at their own pace and the rest of the day in the classroom. Arizona students can even enroll in classes offered by schools in other states, like Florida’s Virtual School (www.flvs.net).

What to Do:

- **Find a list** of Arizona virtual public schools at www.azed.gov/state-board-education/aoi/. Choose between a full- or part-time online program like those offered by Primavera, Connections Academy, Arizona Virtual Academy, or a school that offers individual courses.
- **Contact the online school** to learn more about how to enroll and transfer credits between schools.
- **Learn about virtual programs outside of Arizona** available to children anywhere in the country. See “A Custom Education for Every Child: The Promise of Online Learning and Education Savings Accounts,” available online at www.goldwaterinstitute.org/onlineschool.

DID YOU KNOW? In 2010, 30,338 Arizona students used an online education program.

Going at your own pace: *Lee, Austin, & Jennie*

When Lee learned of a school where her son, Austin, and daughter, Jennie, could work at their own pace for part of the day, she “fell in love with the model that allowed them to work independently.”

Austin and Jennie attend Carpe Diem Charter School, one of the highest-performing schools in Arizona. At Carpe Diem, children work on their lessons at their own pace in the computer lab for half of the day and attend classes for the other half.

Lee can even use the school’s website to keep track of her children’s progress and grades. “I know exactly the grades they are getting and why,” Lee says. “I know exactly where they are and what they are struggling with.”

“This is the way of the future,” she says. “It’s quite incredible, actually.”

Charter schools are tuition-free public schools created by parents, teachers, and community leaders. All charters are open to all Arizona students, no matter where they live.

Different schools for different needs:

Jen & Maxwell

Jen's son, Maxwell, is highly intelligent. Jen recognized this early in his life, but she also saw the difficulty he had in some social situations. Anticipating the challenges he would face in a traditional classroom, Jen enrolled him in Benchmark School, a public charter school.

Benchmark uses ability grouping and multiple-teacher classrooms to provide instruction that helps both excelling and struggling students move at their own pace.

Jen thinks this approach helps all students in the class: "None of them feel excluded and they can learn at their own pace. A superior product comes out of it for all of the groups," she says.



What to Do:

- **To find a charter school in Arizona**, visit the Arizona Department of Education's charter school directory at www.ade.az.gov/charter-schools/search/. You can also call the Arizona State Board for Charter Schools at (602) 364-3080 or visit them online at www.asbcs.az.gov/parent_resources/default.asp for more information.
- **Compare schools** on www.greatschools.org or on the Arizona Charter Schools Association's "Education Evaluator" at www.azcharters.org/maps.
- **Contact your charter school**. Some charter schools accept students throughout the year, while others have a waiting list. For these schools, you may have to put your child's name in a lottery for available space.
- **Check with the school office to find out how to register**. Some charter schools have registration periods that begin in the fall prior to the school year in which you want to enroll your child.

DID YOU KNOW?

In 2011-2012, a higher percentage of charter schools earned an "A" on their state report cards than traditional public schools.



A photograph of several young children running happily across a green grassy field. In the background, a woman is walking, and a chain-link fence is visible under a clear blue sky. The image is framed by a blue border at the top and a gold border at the bottom.

Every Student has a Story

Founded in 1988 with the blessing of the late Senator Barry Goldwater, the Goldwater Institute's mission is to advance freedom and protect the Constitution. The Goldwater Institute is a 501c(3) organization and accepts only private donations, not government funding or contract research. We have contributors from all 50 states and no single contributor provides more than five percent of revenue. We have received the highest ratings possible by non-profit accountability organizations Charity Navigator and GuideStar.

