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ESA scholarships educate students, rich or poor, cheaper than public schools can

Opinion: Don't buy into the myth that universal vouchers are price-gouging taxpayers. They educate students at a lower cost.

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Who would support a program that “price-gouges” families and spends more than a billion dollars of Arizona taxpayer money every year by subsidizing the education of wealthy families at an inflated cost per student?

Well, for those eager to condemn Arizona’s Empowerment Scholarship Account (ESA) program, there’s just one problem.

The scheme described above isn’t the state’s ESA program. It’s the state’s *public school system*.

In fact, as revealed in two reports newly issued this year from the Goldwater Institute, where I work — and which helped pioneer the original concept — Arizona’s ESA program is successfully delivering educational opportunity to students of all backgrounds at a far lower cost per student than the traditional public school system.

Vouchers cover tuition at most private schools

How could that be, you might ask, when the “experts” have assured us that the ESA program costs state taxpayers more money per student than public school, that private schools simply shovel ESA funds into higher tuition bills, and that ESAs are simply “a handout to the wealthy?”

Well, let’s look at the actual data.

Critics love to proclaim, for instance, that private school tuition is too costly — even with an ESA — for anyone but the wealthiest to afford.

Another view: ESAs are draining Arizona, and the GOP will pay

But the reality is that most private schools — especially religiously affiliated ones — go out of their way to keep tuition rates as low as possible for families.

In fact, the typical ESA scholarship (just more than \$7,000) covers nearly 100% of tuition at the majority of Arizona private grade schools (up to eighth grade), which have a median annual tuition rate of \$7,400.

(About 80% of ESA students are in eighth grade or below).

Taxpayers spend more on public school students

In contrast, Arizonans annually pay more than \$12,200 per public school student through state and local taxes alone. That's even before piling on what we all pay in federal taxes as well, bringing the total price tag north of \$14,700, on average — more than the full sticker price of *college* tuition at Arizona State University.

It's true that ESA awards increase to \$9,800 on average when including the disproportionately high share of special needs children served by the program.

But no matter how you slice it, in virtually every single case, it costs Arizona taxpayers less money to educate a student in grade school, middle school, and/or high school via the ESA program than Arizona taxpayers would spend on that same student in the public school system.

We spend more to educate rich kids in public schools

In fact, ESA students are forced to forfeit large chunks of funding that critics and “fact-checkers” conspicuously ignore — such as the nearly \$1,000 per student allocated for every one of their public school peers (no matter how wealthy) through the state's Classroom Site Fund, which virtually every Arizonan pays into via a state sales tax surcharge.

Overall, Arizonans spend 10 to 20 times more money subsidizing the education of students from “wealthy families” (those earning more than \$150,000 a year) in public school than they do supporting students of similar means who've joined the ESA program under the expanded universal eligibility category from a prior private or homeschool arrangement.

In fact, the estimates suggest that Arizona taxpayers spend at least \$1-2 billion a year on behalf of such “wealthy” public school kids.

So enough of the false attacks on universal vouchers

Of course, we hear not a peep from critics of the ESA program suggesting that these public school families are too costly or are undeserving of aid.

ESA opponents such as Gov. Katie Hobbs have already had to abandon false attacks against the program.

For instance, after suggesting earlier this year that private schools were “price-gouging” families by “hiking the cost of tuition” in response to ESA expansion, her office quickly went silent on the issue after the Goldwater Institute revealed that it was actually *public schools* that had increased costs most significantly.

Now, it's time for critics of the program to set aside the rest of their double standards and acknowledge a simple truth: Arizona's ESA program is serving students of all backgrounds and at lower taxpayer cost than the state's government-operated education system.

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