

# **Arizona Alliance of Black School Educators (AzABSE)**

## **Statement Against the Expansion of the Empowerment Scholarship Account in Arizona: We Support Education Excellence for ALL Children**

### **Introduction**

Arizona has one of the most open school choice environments and one of the lowest funded education systems in the United States. These two factors have significant negative implications for Arizona's children and their families, especially those in the most minoritized communities. In 2018, 65% of Arizona voters voted against Prop 305, which would have opened the Empowerment Scholarship Account (ESA) program, otherwise known as school vouchers, to up to 30,000 students. Yet, four years later in 2022, the Arizona Legislature disregarded the voters and enacted an even greater expansion of school choice by passing the largest universal voucher program in the nation. This program offers families an annual voucher of approximately \$7,000 per student that can be used toward educational expenses, including private secular and religious education, homeschooling, and more.

Research on existing school voucher programs in other states shows several concerning consequences, particularly when it comes to educational quality and equity. In terms of test scores in reading and math, recent studies show significantly negative outcomes of school vouchers in Washington D.C., Ohio, Indiana, and Louisiana. Scholars also caution that school vouchers can contribute to increased racial/ethnic and economic segregation in schools, a rise in private companies exploiting families by providing low-quality educational services/resources, and a lack of academic and financial transparency and accountability among private schools. Perhaps the most harmful aspect of school vouchers is the depletion of funding from public schools to private entities, which is likely to contribute negative educational outcomes especially among the most historically marginalized children<sup>1</sup>.

In December of 2022, an Ohio judge allowed the continuation of a lawsuit filed by over 200 public school districts challenging Ohio's school voucher program on the basis that this program is harming students in public schools. Like the expansion of Arizona's ESA program, Ohio's EdChoice Scholarship program was created with the intention of helping students in underperforming districts to afford private education. Yet, Ohio's public school districts claim

that Ohio's EdChoice Scholarship program increases segregation in public schools, is unconstitutionally funded by taxpayers (as public funds are being directed to private, religious institutions), and therefore is discriminatory<sup>ii</sup>.

### **Relevance to AZ and AzABSE**

Contrary to Ohio's EdChoice Scholarship Program, which is limited to low-income students and those in underperforming districts, Arizona expanded ESAs to all students in the state, regardless of income. In the fall semester of 2022, the first academic semester of the expansion, 31,750 ESA applications were filed. Most of these students, about 80%, were not in public schools, meaning that they were already attending a private school or being homeschooled. Many of the families receiving these scholarships already had the financial resources to send their children to private schooling. Consequently, Arizona taxpayers spent \$177 million, in just one year, to provide largely unneeded subsidies. A recent report found that 45% of all applications came from the wealthiest quarter of households in Arizona, those with an annual income greater than \$80,000. Yet families who earn less than the state's median income of \$65,000, which accounts for over half of students in the state, represent less than 33% of all applicants<sup>iii</sup>.

The consequences of the ESA program are not just limited to taxpayer dollars being given to wealthy families instead of invested in public education. This voucher program will likely harm students' academic achievement and their access to equal educational opportunities. This was the case with Louisiana, which significantly expanded its voucher program from a smaller pilot program to statewide eligibility<sup>iv</sup>. Researchers found that the sudden increase in demand from families overwhelmed existing private schools, harming academic outcomes. In Arizona, 97% of students from wealthy families, the primary beneficiaries of the ESA program, have access to well-performing public schools<sup>v</sup>.

While high-quality private schools exist, they will not have space to serve all students. Consequently, families will have to contend with enrolling their children in lower performing private schools that are unaccountable to the public and operate with essentially no oversight or transparency but use flashy marketing to obfuscate their mediocrity when it comes to actually educating *all* children. Although this also might result in more capacity for students in higher quality public schools, not all families can access these schools due to barriers such as transportation. Also, Arizona will likely experience a rise in less credible private schools that

will set tuition at the amount that families receive for ESAs. While the ESA expansion leaves some families with more school choice, the quality of choices will likely decline statewide. Moreover, only those families who can navigate barriers, such as transportation, costs beyond ESAs, and sorting through schools to find the “good ones,” will be able to access these options.

### **AzABSE Position**

The Arizona Alliance of Black School Educators (AzABSE) takes a position against the current universal Empowerment Scholarship Account (ESA) program in Arizona. As an organization, AzABSE believes that ESA negatively impacts student achievement, harms public education, and contributes to greater educational inequities. Aligned with AzABSE’s purpose of improving the quality of education for all students, we believe that the universal ESA program should be discontinued. At the very least, if this program is not discontinued, we expect the Arizona Legislature to exclude wealthy families from receiving ESAs and require academic accountability and transparency from any private schools that accept ESAs. Moreover, we believe that all forms of privatizing education (e.g., vouchers, charter schools, and Mircoschools), must be closely examined and meet a standard of equity and excellence in education.

### **AzABSE Recommendations**

Our recommendations to policy makers:

1. Support Governor Hobb’s efforts to repeal, limit, or reform the expansion of ESAs.
2. The Arizona legislature and Governor Hobb should practice fiscal responsibility by clearly identifying, being transparent about the funding sources for ESAs, and detailing how ESA funding influences any other educational resources previously allocated to public schools.
3. The State should also exclude wealthy families from receiving ESAs.
4. Create more transparency by mandating private schools that receive vouchers to report disaggregated data (e.g., attendance, academic indicators) and make available for all partners to review, including families.
5. Create a system to identify and support schools that are offering equitable educational opportunities for Black and other minoritized children.

Our recommendations to educators:

1. Support public education by working with and for district schools as a priority over private schools.
2. Stay up to date on new and changing policies that impact Arizona's public education system.
3. Participate in organizations that support public education in Arizona and the rest of the United States (e.g., Arizona Alliance of Black School Educators, NAACP, Save our Schools).

Our recommendations to families:

1. Support public education by partnering with and sending your children to district schools.
2. Stay up to date on new and changing policies that impact Arizona's public education system.
3. Participate in organizations that support public education in Arizona and the rest of the United States (e.g., Arizona Alliance of Black School Educators, NAACP, Save our Schools).
4. Consider filing a lawsuit against the expansion of ESAs on the basis of its unconstitutionality of funding religious schools, potential for discriminatory policies/practices, and/or potential expansion of school segregation.

---

<sup>i</sup> See reports for evidence 1: [Estimating a Price Tag for School Vouchers | National Education Policy Center \(colorado.edu\)](#) and 2: [NEPC Review: #StudentsFirst: Empowering Parents to Help Students Regain Lost Learning \(The Buckeye Institute, September 2022\) | National Education Policy Center \(colorado.edu\)](#)

<sup>ii</sup> See news article about Ohio lawsuit: <https://www.wowktv.com/news/ohio/ohios-crippling-private-school-vouchers-will-see-trial-for-lawsuit-judge-rules/>

<sup>iii</sup> See report: [https://grandcanyoninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/GCI\\_Analysis\\_Universal-Vouchers-Help-High-Income-Earners-the-Most\\_Nov\\_6\\_2022.pdf](https://grandcanyoninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/GCI_Analysis_Universal-Vouchers-Help-High-Income-Earners-the-Most_Nov_6_2022.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> <https://educationresearchalliancenola.org/files/publications/Mills-Wolf-Effects-of-LSP-on-Student-Achievement-After-Three-Years.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> [https://grandcanyoninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/GCI\\_Analysis\\_Universal-Vouchers-Help-High-Income-Earners-the-Most\\_Nov\\_6\\_2022.pdf](https://grandcanyoninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/GCI_Analysis_Universal-Vouchers-Help-High-Income-Earners-the-Most_Nov_6_2022.pdf)