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## Education Savings Accounts: Arizona's Progress Could Be Nebraska's Future

All parents want what's best for their children, and that means providing them with the best education possible. To that end, a few states are beginning to allow parents to take a hands-on approach to education with Education Savings Accounts (ESA) leaving us all with one question. Why wouldn't we want to provide all tools available to our Nebraska families, especially those with special needs?

In Nebraska, as with most states, there are never enough resources to meet the unique needs of every school district and every individual student. Some parents and organizations, like the Platte Institute, have argued that a school voucher system or an education savings account program could empower many families to get the instruction their children need.

For example, The Manhattan Institute's Research shows special-needs students make more gains in reading and math while attending the school of their choice, or that of their family.<sup>[1]</sup> The study also shows educational choice improves parental satisfaction in the areas of student safety, overall academic achievement, and increased graduation rates.<sup>[2]</sup> <sup>[3]</sup> An additional added benefit to these alternative education options is that they provide competition and encourage public schools to strive to improve student achievement and meet the needs of students.

In Arizona, ESAs are working, thanks to a 2011 legislative bill signed into law by Governor Jan Brewer, allowing ESA's for Arizona children. <sup>[4]</sup>

Specific qualifications must be met before a student can utilize Arizona's ESA system. Other than being a current Arizona resident, the child has to either have special needs, have an active duty military parent/guardian, be a ward of the juvenile court, be in foster care or achieve permanency through adoption, or attend a school with a failing grade.<sup>[5]</sup>

If an ESA is established, the Arizona Department of Education calculates the per pupil amount and makes quarterly deposits into the individual accounts. These accounts are private and the parents have direct control over expenditures, all of which must be related to education. The ESA funds cannot be used to go to another public school, as only private or home school options are eligible. Arizona parents are able to use these

accounts to pay for tuition, school supplies, and online or outside educational resources.

One of the best provisions of Arizona's ESA program is the transparency in payments. The Arizona Department of Education audits the accounts quarterly and the parents must send receipts for any expenditures.<sup>[6]</sup> This process provides transparency for expenditures and fast identification of potential misuse of funds. Arizona's ESA program allows parents to make the best decisions for their children's educational achievement, but also allows the state oversight to ensure the program is not abused. <sup>[7]</sup>

As Nebraska looks for solutions for diverse student populations, from under-performing schools in Omaha to a rural setting where students may have to drive 50 miles to school, the Platte Institute encourages lawmakers to explore alternatives to the traditional public school model. We need to transition from funding schools to funding students with a per-pupil formula in an ESA. Alternative models, such as the Educational Savings Account, allow parents the freedom to choose the best educational path for their children - including those with special needs - while providing transparency and accountability on how taxpayer money is spent on education.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Education Savings Accounts: A Promising Way Forward on School Choice, The Heritage Foundation, [http://thf\\_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2011/pdf/wm3382.pdf](http://thf_media.s3.amazonaws.com/2011/pdf/wm3382.pdf)

<sup>[2]</sup> Ibid

<sup>[3]</sup> The Effect of Special Education Vouchers on Public School Achievement: Evidence From Florida's McKay Scholarship Program, The Manhattan Institute  
[http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr\\_52.htm](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_52.htm)

<sup>[4]</sup> SB 1553, <http://www.azleg.gov/legtext/50leg/1r/bills/sb1553h.pdf>

<sup>[5]</sup> Ibid

<sup>[6]</sup> Arizona's Educational Accounts Turn Two, The Heartland Institute,  
<http://news.heartland.org/newspaper-article/2012/10/20/arizonas-education-savings-accounts-turn-two>

<sup>[7]</sup> Education Savings Accounts: Questions and Answers, The Goldwater Institute,  
<http://goldwaterinstitute.org/article/education-savings-accounts-questions-and-answers>



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