



## Don't Jump the Gun: The Need for Caution and Accountability in School Choice

BY DAVID G. BRONNER

The recent school choice movement, commonly referred to as parental choice, is advocating for the creation of Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) funded by public monies for all students, regardless of household income and current enrollment status. These accounts would be funded from all taxpayers' dollars, not just parent taxpayer dollars. The creation of such a new and expansive government-funded education program should be undertaken with caution and full consideration of the potential impacts on public education.

The Alabama Policy Institute (API) published a report (<https://alabamapolicy.org/>) on school choice in Alabama and nationally. The report gives an overview of the states that have established ESAs or voucher programs with universal eligibility. Based on the messaging from school choice advocacy groups, one would think that most other states have ESAs with universal eligibility and Alabama is late to the game. But based on the API report, these programs are relatively new, enacted by only a handful of states, with most having accountability and testing requirements.

Only six states have enacted universal ESAs, with only two currently in effect this school year (Arizona and Florida). Arizona is the oldest but it only took effect in the 2022-23 school year. Three states

(Arkansas, Iowa, and West Virginia) are phasing in universal eligibility for ESAs over the next few years. Five of the six states have accountability measures. Four states (Arkansas, Florida, Iowa, and West Virginia) require testing for participating students, while Utah requires parents to submit annual education reports. Three states (Florida, Iowa, and West Virginia) also impose requirements on participating schools, and two states (Arkansas and Iowa) require private school attendance for ESA eligibility.

The bottom line – “a one-size-fits-all” solution is not being used across America, and Alabama is anything but behind the curve on this issue. In fact, according to The Heritage Foundation, Alabama ranks 18th in the nation in school choice based on its tax-credit scholarship program, which was recently expanded during the last legislative session, and its charter schools, which were authorized by legislation passed in 2015.

If the Legislature wants to expand its school choice options and enact ESAs, it should not be done at the expense of traditional, charter, and magnet public schools, which may be the only realistic options for children in many areas, including rural Alabama. The Legislature has recently launched new initiatives, such as the programs created under the Literacy and

Numeracy Acts, to continue to improve public education. Any new school choice programs should not undo these efforts or shift focus away from continued efforts to improve public education.

**Accountability measures should play a major role** in any school choice legislation. There is no accountability where the parents of the children receive money directly with no assurance that the money will be spent on the child's education. At the very least, testing is needed to ensure that children are learning.

The API report on school choice relies upon test results to support the argument that academic performance in Alabama's public classrooms is inadequate and that a change needs to be made. **If these tests are necessary to measure the education outcomes of public schools, shouldn't they also be used to measure the education outcomes of ESAs?** Public schools are held accountable for how they spend public dollars and for whether they are adequately educating our children. The same accountability should apply to ESAs.

We all have an interest in making sure that every child in Alabama has access to the very best education. Let's not jump the gun – any school choice expansion should be handled with caution and accountability to ensure that all children benefit. ●