



Individual Education Savings Accounts

AFT Pennsylvania opposes taxpayer-funded education savings accounts and other privatization gimmicks. ESAs, vouchers and education tax credits have not delivered better outcomes for students. Through education savings accounts, public tax dollars are diverted from public schools, which serve the vast majority of Pennsylvania's children, to private and parochial schools, which pick and choose students and are neither fiscally transparent nor accountable for producing better academic results. In most cases, Senate Bill 2 will divert tax dollars directly from public schools, reducing their ability to meet the educational needs of the students who remain.

- **SB 2 won't improve student outcomes.** Twenty years of research into similar privatization schemes shows that ESAs, vouchers, education tax credits and similar gimmicks failed to raise student achievement and graduation rates significantly. Large-scale studies of similar, voucher programs show that many students lose ground in reading and math.
- **ESAs do not provide parents with school "choice."** Parents can apply to private and parochial schools, but nonpublic schools – not parents – decide which students attend. In Pennsylvania, many communities don't have any nonpublic school options, and elsewhere, parents will find tax-funded ESAs woefully insufficient to cover private school tuition and fees.
- **SB 2 is a huge and expensive new entitlement program that will be costly to fund and require a big new bureaucracy to administer.** An independent analysis by Keystone Crossroads of state enrollment data found more than 220,300 eligible students in about 400 schools in 44 counties, at a cost in excess of \$1 billion per year – diverting up to one-fifth of the state education budget. Taxpayers will pay private school tuition for students who never attended public schools and cover education expenses not normally paid from state taxes. The legislation requires new bureaucracies to create the program; develop guidelines; approve participating families, schools and programs; monitor accounts for fraud and waste; and track the movement of students and tax dollars in and out of district and nonpublic schools.
- **SB 2 excludes students attending failing charter and cyber charter schools.** Students attending failing charter schools are not eligible for ESAs, nor are students attending one of Pennsylvania's 13 virtual schools – all of which are publicly funded failing schools.

- **SB 2 encourages discriminatory practices.** Public schools must serve all students. Private and parochial schools can and do discriminate, and SB 2 does not require them to change discriminatory admission policies or practices to receive public funding. Under SB 2, public tax dollars could be used to discriminate against students based on religion, intellectual abilities, language skills, gender or sexual identity. Taxpayers could end up funding schools their own children are barred from attending.
- **SB 2 will impoverish already-struggling schools.** Most low-performing public schools are also high-poverty and under-funded schools. Instead of investing in programs to improve these schools, ESAs raid school district budgets and leave them without sufficient resources to educate all children. Poorly funded schools will take a second budget hit as ESAs are set up for children who live in their attendance area but who never attended, or only briefly attended, the school.
- **SB 2 lacks public transparency.** Private and parochial schools are run by private boards, which do not adhere to open meetings or public record laws, and are not in any way accountable to taxpayers or parents for how they spend our tax dollars.
- **SB 2 lacks academic accountability.** Private and parochial schools are not required to report student achievement, attendance or graduation data; administer standardized tests or publish test scores; or comply with many PA School Code requirements or federal accountability laws, including special education. The lack of academic accountability undermines the ability of lawmakers to determine whether the program benefits students and makes it hard for parents to select better schools.
- **SB 2 complicates school district budgeting.** Without a cap on the number of ESAs, school boards and administrators may not know from year to year how much money will be diverted to ESAs, putting even more pressure on districts to raise property taxes to fill the hole ESAs leave.
- **SB 2 could be tied up in expensive litigation for years.** Nevada’s ESA program been tied up in litigation since 2015 and the Nevada Supreme Court blocked funding for the program.
- **ESA proponents often move to expand ESAs to all students.** ESA programs in Arizona, Florida and Nevada began by offering vouchers to limited groups of students, like those who qualify for special education services. According to a recent *New York Times* article, parents using Florida’s special education ESA/vouchers learned too late that in using these programs, students forfeited federal Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) protections and lost vital services. Similar programs require parents to waive their IDEA rights or are silent on the rights of special needs students and make parents responsible for educational tuition and fees not covered by ESAs. Arizona and Nevada began their programs by offering ESAs to students with special needs, but following the lead of “school choice” advocates have pushed to expand the programs to make every child eligible.