

Testimony of Jenny Clark

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Before the Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary, and Secondary Education  
"Education Without Limits: Exploring the Benefits of School Choice"

Tuesday, March 11, 2025

Chairman Kiley, Ranking Member Bonamici, and members of the subcommittee:

Good morning and thank you for this opportunity to testify before the subcommittee today as it explores the benefits of school choice. My name is Jenny Clark. I am the founder and CEO of Love Your School, an Arizona-based non-profit that helps families navigate their school options in Arizona, Alabama, West Virginia, and hopefully the rest of the country, very soon. I am a wife and mother of five school-aged children, three of which have diagnosed learning disabilities. I founded Love Your School in 2019 and since then, our team has helped thousands of families access the educational setting that best meets their child's unique educational needs. I know firsthand with my own children and through our work at Love Your School how transformative education freedom can be for families, especially education savings accounts.

Our family's school choice journey began eight years ago as we homeschooled our two eldest sons and noticed they were struggling with reading. I reached out to my local school district and requested an evaluation, under IDEA's Child Find process. Initially, the district told us that our boys simply lacked "proper instruction." Knowing how much my husband and I worked on their reading instruction, we disagreed with the district. We received an independent educational evaluation which revealed that both of them had, among other diagnoses, severe dyslexia and dysgraphia. To say we felt vindicated sitting in that IEP meeting with 7 district employees is an understatement. Unfortunately, the district had no dyslexia-specific programming. Instead, they offered 30 minutes a week of sight word support, which we knew would not help remediate their dyslexia.

During this time, we first learned of Arizona's Empowerment Scholarship Account program. After jumping through a variety of hoops for the next several months, my boys finally qualified for Arizona's ESA program. This changed everything for my boys *and* for my family. With the \$7,500 ESA scholarship we accessed dyslexia remediation at Dyslexia Pros Arizona and dysgraphia support at Scribble to Script. We finally had access to a variety of dyslexia specific educational resources, audio books, and amazing online programs, like Synthesis School, that boosted their confidence as they progressed in their reading and writing. I could go on and on about the incredible educational resources the ESA program has made possible for our family. The ESA scholarship has been truly transformative in shaping the trajectory of my children's future. According to the latest NAEP scores, tens of millions of children across the country cannot read proficiently. It is a national crisis. Like my boys, I know many of these children would benefit tremendously from an ESA.

Through our work at Love Your School, we have seen how Arizona's ESA program has been a revolutionary educational lifeline for thousands of children. Once Arizona's ESA program became universal in 2022, meaning every school-aged child now qualifies, the program has rapidly grown from around 12,000 children to over 86,000 as of February of this year. Arizona's

ESA program is the most flexible in the country when it comes to accessing educational expenses, tutors, and therapists, and is by the far the most supportive of students with disabilities. Arizona's ESA scholarship is 90% of state allocated per pupil funding and includes weighted-funding for students with disabilities. Arizona's ESA program saves taxpayers money and allows parents to direct their children's education regardless of their income or zip code. After all, we know loving families always know what's best for their children's education.

## **Additional background on the Arizona ESA program as a national model for other states:**

Arizona's ESA program is now around 86,000 students and continues to grow. Prior to the universal expansion of the ESA program in 2022, only around 12,000 families were on an ESA. While Arizona's program has been around since 2011, the barriers to entry were high. For example, parents who had a student with a disability previously could only utilize paperwork from the public school district, and they often found districts negatively perceived them during the evaluation if they knew they were going to apply for an ESA. Further, families used to be required to attend 100 days of public school in order to access the ESA. The popularity of the universal ESA program is evident by the number of families applying every week.

The latest Arizona ESA quarterly report Q2 of FY 2025 includes some informative data:<sup>1</sup>

- 18.5% of students on Arizona's ESA program are students with a disability, compared to 14% in Arizona public district schools. Many families report receiving better options and opportunities for their students with disabilities via an ESA and the data appears to reflect that.
- 53% of the students with disabilities in the ESA program have a diagnosis of autism, compared to 13% in Arizona public schools.<sup>2</sup> Families with autism do receive a higher, weighted scholarship amount. However, in spite of not receiving any federal disability education funding, parents are still able to do more, with less funds, via an ESA for their students with autism.
- The number of students who were in public school immediately prior to switching to an ESA has been steadily increasing since universal ESA was passed:
  - FY 2023 - 21% of universal eligibility students were in public immediately prior to applying.
  - FY 2024 - 47.6% of universal eligibility students were in public immediately prior to applying.
  - FY 2025 - 55.6% of universal eligibility students were in public immediately prior to applying.

To be sure, more work can be done to promote and market the program statewide so more families are aware of this opportunity for their children. However, the argument that only private school families are accessing the ESA program and not public school families is effectively addressed by the growing number of "switchers" in the Arizona program since it became universal.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.azed.gov/sites/default/files/2025/02/ESA%20FY25%20Q2%20Executive%20%26%20Legislative%20Report.pdf>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.azed.gov/sites/default/files/2024/11/2024%20SEAP%20Trends%20Data.pdf>

The majority of expenses in Arizona’s ESA program are tuition and fees at a private or qualified school (58.7%). This expense is followed by tutoring and teaching services (14.7%). These two expense categories comprise over 73% of all ESA expenses.

**Table 10: Number of and amount spent on approved Pay Vendor, reimbursement, and debit card orders by category<sup>7</sup>**  
Fiscal Year 2025—Quarter 2

Spending category	Number of approved orders	Spending	% of total spending
Tuition, textbooks, or fees at a qualified school	49,149	\$101,119,601	58.7%
Tutoring and teaching services	79,910	\$25,323,973	14.7%
Tuition or fees for an online learning program	12,879	\$12,332,913	7.1%
Curriculum	30,731	\$8,660,743	5.0%
Supplemental materials	66,911	\$6,586,084	3.8%
Educational therapies and services for students with a disability	7,786	\$4,230,151	2.4%
Multiple categories <sup>8</sup>	23,877	\$3,053,851	1.8%
Computer hardware and technological devices	5,478	\$2,850,117	1.6%
Services, classes, and extracurricular programs provided by a public school	5,773	\$1,691,020	1.0%
Tuition, textbooks, or fees at an eligible postsecondary education	1,690	\$1,581,219	0.9%
Fees to manage an Arizona Empowerment Scholarship Account	701	\$1,032,532	0.6%
Tuition for life skills and vocational education for students with a disability	1,056	\$933,317	0.5%
Paraprofessionals for students with a disability	655	\$797,082	0.5%
School uniforms	2,786	\$542,819	0.3%
Associated goods and services for students with a disability	1,267	\$496,184	0.3%
Tuition for life skills and vocational education for students with a disability	371	\$495,092	0.3%
Assistive technology for students with a disability	443	\$307,745	0.2%
Public transportation services to a qualified school	799	\$229,625	0.1%
Fees for nationally standardized tests or college admission	275	\$76,063	<.1%
Insurance or surety bond payments	59	\$39,218	<.1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>292,596</b>	<b>\$172,379,349</b>	
<b>Average number of approved orders per business day</b>	<b>4,719</b>		

Families can apply for the Arizona ESA year - round, and funds are pro-rated based on the quarter they apply in. This makes Arizona's program unique and flexible, meaning families can still switch mid-year and have access to the ESA funding.

Arizona's program is the most flexible ESA program when it comes to education service providers that families can access for their children's education. This means Arizona students on an ESA have access to all of the newest programs that launch for kids, such as AI tutor programs, online schools, and everything from reading books to supplementary items like science kits and educational delivery box programs. Because of universal ESA, Arizona has also seen significant growth in educational entrepreneurship with new schools and microschools launching in our state such as KaiPod Learning, Primer, Great Hearts Christos, and many others. Additionally, specialty schools like [Polaris Academy of Mesa](#) are also launching for families who are looking for integrative services for students on the spectrum. These incredible options and more have increased the supply of high-quality schools - all because of the state's ESA program.

Even though the number of students has been steadily increasing, the Arizona Department of Education maintained a surplus of \$4 million in Fiscal Year 2024, as noted in official Department Communications and contrary to myths circulating about the ESA program causing issues for Arizona's budget.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, Arizona public schools are still maintaining surpluses as of FY end 2023 of \$6.4 billion, and all this while reading and math scores in Arizona have fallen.<sup>4</sup>

Given the national emergency we appear to be facing with the latest NAEP scores and the fact that even with \$190 billion in stimulus funds, only 30% of fourth grade public school students across the country performed at or above NAEP proficient in reading, we have to look at the most timely and innovative approaches to solving this crisis. ESA programs put parents back in the driver's seat of their children's education, and allow them to move quickly and decisively to help their child be in the best education environment possible. Our country can not thrive with a functionally illiterate society, and ESA programs can serve as an immediate solution for states facing massive reading failures and achievement gaps.

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.azed.gov/communications/state-education-funding-comes-under-budget-demolishes-esa-budget-myth>

<sup>4</sup><https://www.heritage.org/education/commentary/the-grand-canyon-institute-cries-wolf-again-school-choice>