

NEPC Review: Helping Families Navigate the Changing Education Landscape (Cato Institute, June 2024)



Reviewed by:

Huriya Jabbar
University of Southern California

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National Education Policy Center

School of Education
University of Colorado Boulder
nepc.colorado.edu

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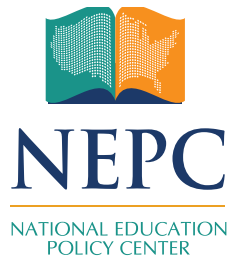
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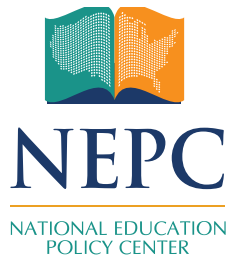
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Summary

The past few years have seen significant growth in the newest form of voucher, called Educational Savings Accounts (ESAs), which are publicly funded savings accounts that parents can use not just for private-school tuition but also for other eligible expenses, including tutoring, curriculum, and sports equipment. A recent Cato Institute report argues for adding, as an eligible expense in state ESA programs, “choice navigators,” individuals who help families identify and enroll in educational programs that meet their child’s needs. The report correctly identifies a documented challenge in school choice policy—families’ differential access to information and resources needed to successfully access and enroll in educational programs. However, the report cites almost no research and provides minimal evidence, aside from a few handpicked testimonials, to support its claims about choice navigators as helpful in addressing these challenges. Accordingly, the report asks readers to simply accept the purported benefits of these consultants or choice navigators for families. Given the lack of new evidence or support from prior literature, the report’s conclusions are not valid or useful to policymakers.



NEPC Review: Helping Families Navigate the Changing Education Landscape (Cato Institute, June 2024)

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I. Introduction

Over the past few years, several states in the U.S. have expanded or adopted new school voucher policies. These programs aim to give families public funds to send their children to private schools. Proponents argue that school vouchers empower families to choose the best schools for their children, save the state money, generate healthy competition between traditional and private schools, and remedy unequal access to high quality schools for low-income families. Opponents argue that voucher policies draw away much-needed funds from public schools and are just the first step in a broader effort to privatize public schools. These are tense, polarizing debates that, too often, are based on ideology rather than evidence.¹

Early school voucher programs, which provided public funding to families allowing them to send their children to private school, were often designed to target low-income families or children with disabilities. In contrast, new “universal” voucher policies, such as those enacted in Florida² and Arizona,³ are much more expansive, and many new programs do not require such means-testing.

One form of school vouchers, Educational Savings Accounts (ESAs), have recently gained significant momentum. ESAs are publicly funded savings accounts that parents can use not just for private-school tuition and fees, but also for other eligible expenses that vary by state, including costs of tutoring, online education programs, textbooks, school supplies, sports equipment, and other supplementary educational materials. ESA programs have been adopted in 17 states and were considered in at least 36 states in 2023.⁴ While advocates argue that ESAs allow families to customize education to meet the needs of their children, scholars and advocates have raised concerns that such programs subsidize the wealthy, drain funding from public schools,⁵ and are insufficiently regulated.

A report⁶ published by the Cato Institute, *Helping Families Navigate the Changing Education Landscape*, authored by Colleen Hroncich and Jamie Buckland, describes how ESAs have the potential to transform education by giving families increased options for tailoring their child’s education. The report asserts that ESAs allow families to “unbundle” school services, comparing attending a traditional public school to a “bundled” product, which offers academic and extracurricular options in a one-stop shop. With ESAs, families can unbundle education by, for example, attending a local school part-time, taking some classes online, and supplementing with additional activities. While previous school voucher policies allowed families to select a different “bundled” product (a private school) the report argues that ESAs are a “whole new ball game,” which allow families to customize education further.

With increasing options, the report notes, families are likely to have increasing difficulty sorting among them.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

To assist families facing a daunting and complicated school choice landscape, the report concludes that the inclusion of “choice navigators”—individuals who help families identify and select among educational options in order to meet their child’s needs—should be included as an eligible expense in state Educational Savings Account (ESA) programs. As programs grow increasingly complex, the report finds, families need more and better support.

The report also finds that different navigation services may be needed for parents and for potential providers of educational services. Parents, for example, may need help understanding the state requirements and potential options for their child, such as what types of education to pursue, or what curricula are approved and available. Low-income parents and/or those who are not native English speakers may face even more barriers to effectively accessing school choice programs due to limited resources and/or lack of translation.

In addition, the report’s analysis of language in existing state ESA policy finds that only Florida explicitly allows choice navigators as an eligible expense but 16 other states fail to mention the option—although language in a few states arguably may allow it. However, the report also finds Florida’s legislation too restrictive because it requires choice navigators to have an educator’s certificate or other demonstrated mastery of the terrain. Here, the report concludes that policy should be more flexible, allowing for other forms of expertise, such as experience with homeschooling.

III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report does not consider the merit of choice programs themselves, but instead begins with the unsupported assumption that families will benefit when they can “unbundle” educational services to tailor programs to their children’s interests and needs. The rationale is that especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a demonstrated increase in families

seeking to customize their children's learning experiences, which now include homeschooling, microschooning, and hybrid options. The report argues that choice navigators can be especially helpful to families from disadvantaged backgrounds who lack personal resources to secure help and/or who are not native speakers and may need translation as well as choice services. The report further asserts that choice navigators can help potential providers understand ESA policies.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The report cites little to no research supporting its advocacy. Given the newness of these universal forms of vouchers and educational savings accounts, this is somewhat understandable. However, even if there is not specific research on choice navigators in the context of Educational Savings Accounts (ESAs), the report misses other relevant work that could have been included or cited.

Some research on choice navigators or alternative, information-based approaches to help families navigate school choice has appeared, but it is not cited in the report. Research has found, for example, that targeted information packets to low-income families can help them to select schools with higher test scores.⁷ Qualitative research has explored the range of services offered by parent resource centers to help families navigate school choice.⁸ Furthermore, there is some very limited work on choice navigation specifically, also ignored. One study in New Orleans examined different supports for families whose schools were closing and were forced into a choice.⁹ It found that many families receiving support from EdNavigator, a choice navigation service, selected and received seats in the highly rated schools recommended by the organization. Another report¹⁰ examined navigators in Washington, DC who worked with low-income families to help them research schools, keep track of deadlines, and submit online applications. However, it is important to note that this research on targeted programs for predominately low-income families of color does not necessarily support the report's recommendation to expand navigation services to *all* families, as this would likely reproduce existing inequalities in access to schools. Furthermore, prior research points out the challenges of scalability of such supports, as well as the fact that navigators cannot address barriers that arise due to too few desirable schools in a region.¹¹

Perhaps more importantly, research on ESAs and school vouchers themselves is ignored. The report begins with an assumption that vouchers and ESAs are beneficial for families but does not cite research to support the claim. Only one peer-reviewed study, which the report does cite, currently exists on the most recent version of ESAs. This study finds that families who remain in Florida's ESA program over multiple years begin to "customize" more, using funds for expenses beyond private school tuition, such as tutoring or other specialized services.¹² While this may be the case, increased customization in itself may not benefit children.

In addition to this one study, a large body of research exists on the effectiveness of similar private-school voucher, neo-voucher, or ESA programs of the past, many of which show

strong negative outcomes. For example, empirical research from voucher programs in Louisiana and Indiana have found significant negative impacts on academic outcomes for participating students,¹³ and that the most disadvantaged students are less likely to use voucher programs or remain in them.¹⁴ Studies of tax credit scholarship programs have found no effect on student achievement in math or reading overall.¹⁵ Furthermore, studies of tax credit programs have found that these programs are less likely to benefit low-income students, as higher-income families were more likely to use the credit.¹⁶ The point here is that while parents may have increasing options, those options are more likely to harm than help students' academic achievement while also typically failing to serve those families they purport to help most.

In addition, while the report describes the difficulty families face when navigating ESAs and school choice, it does not cite the large body of scholarship demonstrating how charter and open-enrollment policies can create a difficult context for parents. Such research demonstrates that inequitable access to school-choice policies can be due to bureaucratic hurdles and structural constraints of transportation or geography.¹⁷ While such research could have underscored the argument for choice navigation services, it also reveals the limits of information-based supports in the context of vast systemic inequality.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

As noted above, the report does not include any systematic empirical data or analysis to underscore its point about the value of choice navigators in Educational Savings Account (ESA) policies. Rather, the results rely primarily on one of the author's own experiences in the context of West Virginia, where her organization provides support to families navigating school choice.

The report's review of policy language in ESA legislation, which finds explicit approval of choice navigators only in Florida, is a useful contribution to understanding the limits and the scope of existing policy. The analysis looks closely into West Virginia policy language and argues that navigation expenses could potentially be eligible under the line item for "tutoring" and "other qualified expenses."

Yet, this policy analysis is far from systematic. There is no methods section, and it is unclear from the report's text what policy documents were reviewed, when, and for what key terms, as well as why some states with ESAs are highlighted (Arkansas, Oklahoma, West Virginia), and not others. Without more explanation of how these cases were chosen, we do not know if they are typical cases, which reflect the general trends across states, or if they are outliers.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The report correctly notes that the school choice environment is becoming increasingly complex, particularly with the advent of ESAs. Families, particularly those from historically

marginalized groups, may especially need more guidance. But the report provides almost no evidence, aside from a few handpicked testimonials, to support its claims that paying consultants or choice navigators will pay off for families and enhance equity, and therefore should be considered an eligible expense. Given the lack of either new or prior evidence or literature, the report's conclusion—that states should include choice navigators as an eligible expense— is neither supported nor valid.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

As universal voucher and ESA policies are increasingly adopted and implemented across states, the question the report raises of what expenses should and should not be eligible is an important one to consider. Given recent news controversies¹⁸ about how affluent families spend these publicly funded resources on seemingly unnecessary expenses, these are important conversations to have. Similarly, the report calls attention to a key and ongoing challenge in school choice policy—families' inequitable access to information and resources to navigate educational options.

These are important issues. However: Such debates should be informed by evidence as to the benefits of each program, service, or type of expense under consideration. Given that the report depends heavily only on unsupported claims, its lack of evidence makes its recommendation unfounded and no help to policymakers.

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