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Educational Choice in 2016

By Inez Feltscher

Educational Choice Rolls On

Two new school choice programs were passed during the 2016 state legislative sessions: a voucher program in Maryland and a tax credit scholarship in South Dakota. Neither state had any private school choice programs on the books prior to passing them this year, so education reformers have a new number to tout: 25 states and the District of Columbia have empowered parents through 50 private school choice programs that allow them to select the best educational experience for their children!

Maryland Voucher Program for Low-Income Families

Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today (BOOST) became the nation's 26th voucher program this year, when Governor Larry Hogan signed it into law. BOOST allows a students from families eligible for the federal free and reduced price lunch program (up to an income of \$44,955 for a family of four) to participate. The program will begin providing vouchers of up to around \$14,000 to families this year.

Tax-Credit Scholarships in South Dakota

South Dakota joined the ranks of school choice states this year by enacting the Partners in Education Tax Credit Program, be-

coming the 21st state to enact tax-credit scholarships. The law allows insurance companies to claim tax credits for 80 percent of their donation to a scholarship-granting organization, which then awards scholarships of up to around \$4,000 to students whose families meet the program's income requirements.

Mississippi and Arkansas Programs Send First Choice Students Back to School

Educational programs passed last year in Mississippi and Arkansas awarded their first scholarships this school year, allowing

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students in those states to attend schools or educational programs of their choice this back-to-school season.

North Carolina Substantially Expands Court-Vindicated Voucher Program

North Carolina expanded funding for its Opportunity Scholarship Program, following a decision from the state Supreme Court upholding vouchers as compatible with the state constitution. The budget signed by Governor Pat McCrory in mid-July more than triples the funding for the program over time, which will make scholarships available to almost 36,000 low-income North Carolina students over the next decade.

Wisconsin Makes Needed Changes

Up north in Wisconsin, ALEC chairman Leah Vukmir took the lead on improving the state’s already-existing special-needs voucher program with changes that make it easier for families to enroll and correcting drafting errors that were standing in their way.

State Senate Keeps Arizona in the Lead

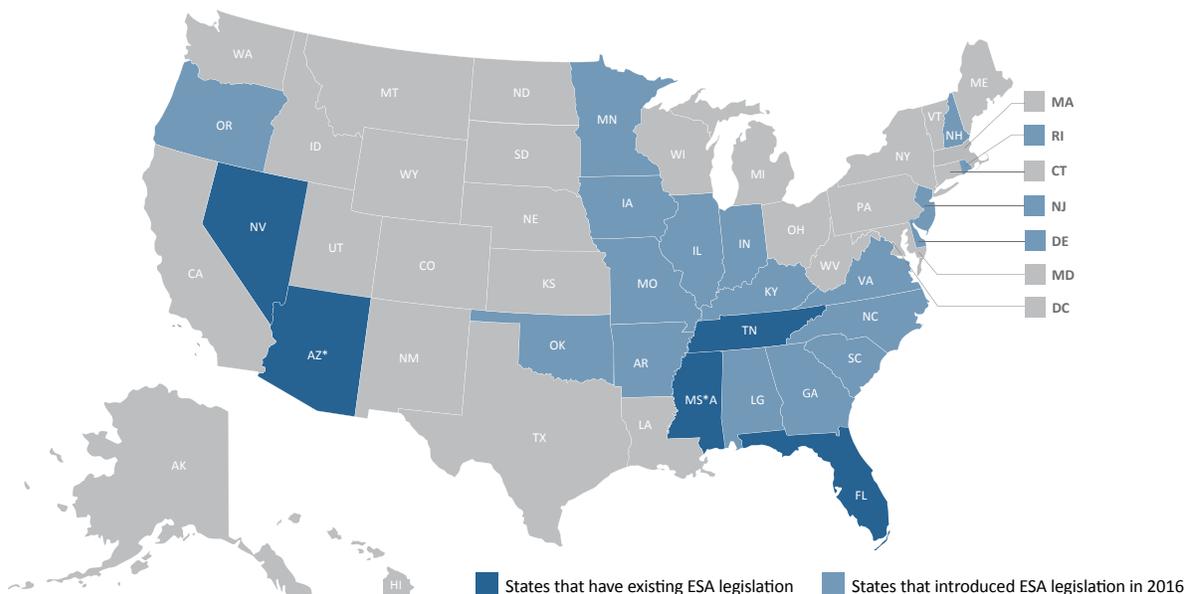
In educational choice trailblazer Arizona, the Senate took a bold first step, passing a bill that, if made law, would make Arizona the second state to offer an education savings account to every student.

While 2011 was named “the Year of School Choice” by the *Wall Street Journal*, the 2017 legislative session may create the “Year of Education Savings Accounts.”

The ESA Revolution

Innovative education savings account programs are just one more example of the states taking the lead and producing real reform. While 2011 was named “the Year of School Choice” by the *Wall Street Journal*, the 2017 legislative session may create the “Year of Education Savings Accounts.” In 2016, ESA or ESA-related legislation was introduced in Alabama, Arkansas, D.C., Delaware, Georgia, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Oregon, Minnesota, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Jersey, North Carolina, Rhode Island, South Carolina and Virginia. Although none of the bills were signed into law, the energy behind education savings accounts was clear in 2016, and looks to be only picking up steam into 2017.

States that Have or Introduced ESA Legislation in 2016



*Current as of April 2016, Florida is considering amendments to its pre-existing ESA bill.

Unfortunately, the nation's boldest education savings account law, which gave every Nevada public school student the option to apply for an ESA instead, is currently under injunction, leaving thousands of parents who had already signed up for the program and made school-year plans scrambling.

Interestingly, the injunction does not relate to the state's Blaine Amendment – 19th-century relics of nativism in 38 state constitutions that were intended to prevent money from flowing to newly-sprung up Catholic schools for Irish and Italian immigrants. The lawsuit brought under the Blaine Amendment against the Nevada program was dismissed in mid-May. The remaining injunction involves the law's financing mechanism and

an obscure provision of the Nevada constitution. Students and families in Nevada, who rallied outside the courthouse during oral arguments, are still waiting on the outcome of that case.

Looking Ahead to 2017

Progress toward universal educational choice must continue. A meta-analysis from the University of Arkansas released this year shows that school choice programs deliver results for students, both in academic outcomes and life success after school. The meta-analysis, which consolidates the results from 19 evaluations of 11 school choice programs both inside and outside the United States, shows that students in school choice programs consistently do significantly better on math and reading assessments than their traditional public school peers, although it may take an adjustment period of a year or two before those gains become evident.

Although test scores are important for standardized comparisons across different schools, learning environments and states, parents frequently rely on more individualized learning indicators to evaluate their children's academic performances – the kind of student-level qualitative data that government bureaucrats and researchers are unable to track.

One way to measure more the more qualitative impact of school choice on students' and families' lives is level of contact with the criminal justice system. A study conducted this year found that Milwaukee's Parental Choice Program – the first program of its kind in the nation, in operation long enough for longitudinal data to exist – decreased both incidence of arrests and convictions among its voucher recipients compared with a public school student "matched" for test scores, neighborhood of residence, and other sociological indicators. In fact, a student using the voucher program was 42 percent less likely to be convicted of any crime and a stunning 79 percent less likely to be convicted of a felony.

Educational choice programs help students succeed, both by the metrics of policymakers and researchers and by softer metrics parents care about. Maybe that's the reason a satisfaction survey taken of Arizona parents using education savings accounts revealed that not a single parent reported dissatisfaction with the program. Here's hoping that states continue to expand educational options for American families in 2017.

New ALEC Model Policies



The Task Force tackled educational choice, homeschooling, assessment and accountability, charter schools, digital learning, and other education topics this year, providing leadership and consensus model policies on these topics, as well as on higher education and workforce.

The Education and Workforce Task Force at ALEC approved the below model policies between October 2015 and September 2016. These and other ALEC education model policies are available for download at ALEC.org/education-policy.

- *The Education Savings Account Act*
- *Resolution Supporting Homeschooling Freedom*
- *Campus Anti-Harassment Act*
- *The Assessment Choice Act*
- *Resolution in Support of Student-Centered Accountability Systems*
- *Student and Family Fair Notice and Impact Statement Act*
- *The Next Generation Charter Schools Act*
- *Digital Teaching and Learning Plan*
- *Growing Our Workforce Investment Now Act*
- *Dual Language Immersion Program Act*

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