
THE SPECIAL NEEDS ESA

What Families Enrolled In The Program Are Saying
After Year One

BRETT KITTREDGE

Preface by **JASON BEDRICK, M.P.P.**

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About Empower Mississippi

Empower Mississippi is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to ensuring that every child in Mississippi has the opportunity to flourish through access to a high quality education.

We Believe:

- A quality education is critical in preparing a child for success in life.
- No child should be denied access to a quality education because of where they live or their parents' level of income.
- No one knows a child better than their parents.
- Parents should be empowered to choose the best educational setting for their child.
- Public education funds should follow every child to the school or services that best meet his or her needs.

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Executive Summary

Mississippi is entering an exciting new era of educational opportunity.

For two years, Empower Mississippi, along with parents and organizations for special needs families, supported passage of the Equal Opportunity for Students with Special Needs Act, which provides families with an education savings account (ESA) that they can use to obtain a wide variety of educational services and products for their children, including private school tuition, educational therapy, tutoring, textbooks, curricular materials, and more. The program passed in 2015 and entered its second year of operation at the beginning of the 2016-2017 school year.

The purpose of this first-of-its-kind study was to gain feedback from the families currently using ESAs to gauge their satisfaction with the program and their child's new educational setting. We believe no one is in a better position to make choices regarding a child's education than that child's parents. Our survey finds that ESA participants are overwhelmingly satisfied with both the program and their child's new school.

The survey found that ESA parents are highly satisfied with the ESA program. More than nine out of ten respondents expressed satisfaction with the program, including:

- 63 percent who are very satisfied with the ESA program;
- 28 percent who are somewhat satisfied;
- Five percent who were neither satisfied nor unsatisfied; and
- Five percent who were somewhat unsatisfied.

Moreover, 98 percent of respondents expressed satisfaction with the school or educational program they chose for their child using an ESA, including:

- 71 percent who are very satisfied with the school or program their child is currently in;
- 27 percent who are somewhat satisfied; and
- Two percent who are somewhat unsatisfied.

This contrasts sharply with parents' low level of satisfaction with the school that their child was attending prior to receiving an ESA, for which fewer than three in 10 respondents expressed satisfaction, including:

- 38 percent who were very unsatisfied with the school or program in which their child was educated before enrolling in the ESA program;
- 29 percent who were somewhat unsatisfied;
- Nine percent who were neither satisfied nor unsatisfied;
- 19 percent who were somewhat satisfied; and
- Five percent who were very satisfied.

The results are clear: Mississippi's Special Needs ESA program has empowered families to move their children to new schools and educational settings that work best for their individual learning needs.

Preface: Expanding Opportunity Nationwide

America's education system is evolving.

For more than a century, most children have attended the district school to which they were assigned based on the location of their parents' home. For the most part, children are assigned to a grade level based on the year they were born and are expected to advance at roughly the same pace as their same-aged peers across all subjects—a system that bores advanced students while others struggle to keep up.

This Industrial Age “factory model” of education served a purpose in a bygone era, but it is woefully inadequate for the educational needs of the Information Age. What's needed today is an education system tailored to the learning needs of each individual student rather than some imagined “median” child. However, we should not expect that any one school will be able to meet the unique learning needs of every child who just happens to live nearby. No school can be all things to all children. The time has come to transition from an institution-centered education system to a child-centered one.

Education savings accounts (ESAs) are a key method to make that transition. In states that offer ESAs, parents can opt their child out of their assigned school and have a portion of the funds follow their child to their chosen school or learning environment. ESAs empower families to tailor their child's education with a variety of educational services and products including private school tuition, educational therapy, textbooks, online courses, curricular materials, and more.

In 2011, Arizona became the first state to adopt an ESA program. Eligibility was originally limited to students with special needs and the legislature has subsequently expanded eligibility to include students assigned to low-performing district schools, children adopted through the state's foster system, children in military

families, children living on Native American reservations, and siblings of eligible students. About 150 students participated during the first year of operation and by the fall of 2016, more than 3,200 are using ESAs.

In 2013, Jonathan Butcher of the Goldwater Institute and I conducted the first-ever survey of ESA families in Arizona.¹ All of the respondents were parents of students with special needs. Our survey found unanimous parental satisfaction with the education their children were receiving using the accounts, including 71 percent who were “very satisfied.”

By contrast, only 43 percent of ESA parents were satisfied with district school their child attended prior to receiving an ESA. Some complained that their children weren't challenged in their assigned school, or that they were bullied, or that the school did not have the resources to handle their child's particular condition. The ESA provided these families with viable educational alternatives.

The views of ESA parents are likely not reflective of the general population. Nevertheless, even if most parents are happy with their district school, the survey showed that those schools were not meeting the needs of a sizeable portion of families, thereby demonstrating the need for additional options.

It is not surprising to see similar results in this survey of ESA parents in Mississippi. When empowered with more educational opportunities, parents are more likely to be happy with the learning environment they chose for their children.

Mississippi's ESA for students with special needs is a huge step toward a future in which all children have access to the quality education that works best for them.

— Jason Bedrick, Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom

The Equal Opportunity For Students With Special Needs Act



Gov. Phil Bryant signs the Special Needs ESA into law.

In 2014, the *Clarion-Ledger* released a report which included the troubling statistic that only 23 percent of Mississippi's students with special needs graduate from high school.² Even more troubling, in numerous counties, that number is actually in the low-single digits. It was clear that many of Mississippi's most vulnerable children were being left behind and this pattern would only continue unless policymakers took action.

Lanna Beard was one of those students. Lanna, who was adopted as an infant, was diagnosed with visual perception disorder, fetal alcohol syndrome, and severe ADD. These conditions make it hard for Lanna to process and retain information, focus, and stay on task, thereby making routine activities exceedingly difficult. Unfortunately, although the staff members at her assigned district school worked hard to help her, they were understaffed and burdened by paperwork and so the school was unable to meet her needs.

Lanna's parents began to search for an alternative and her pediatrician recommended

New Summit School, a nonpublic special purpose school in Jackson, about 30 miles from the family's Pelahatchie home. Immediately the Beards fell in love with what New Summit offered, but their excitement was short lived because they knew they couldn't afford the tuition and fees.

Fortunately for the Beards, the Equal Opportunity for Students with Special Needs Act made it a possibility after all.

The Equal Opportunity for Students with Special Needs Act, or the Special Needs ESA as it is often called, passed in the spring of 2015 after a two-year political battle.³ Families were able to use their ESAs for the first time that fall. In the first year, 251 students enrolled in the Special Needs ESA, despite having only a very short window between the application for the program and the first day of school.

During the 2016 legislative session, the legislature expanded ESA eligibility. Previously, students were eligible for an ESA if they had

received an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in the past 18 months. Students are now eligible if they have received an IEP within the five years prior to enrollment, further expanding this opportunity to many families with students with special needs.

As a result, the number of ESA students has reached the program's maximum capacity of 425 students for the 2016-2017 school year.⁴ In fact, the program was oversubscribed, thereby necessitating a lottery to select the final slots and leaving many families on a waiting list.

How ESAs Work

When Mississippi passed the Special Needs ESA in 2015, the Magnolia State became just the third to offer an education savings account (ESA). ESAs have been described as “the way of the future” of the education choice movement because of their potential to allow families to craft a custom education to meet the specific needs of their child.⁵

While other private school choice programs empower families to use the tax dollars associated with their child's education to attend a private school, ESAs can be used to purchase numerous educational services and products beyond private school tuition. Eligible ESA expenses include:

- Private school tuition and fees
- Tutoring
- Therapy
- Textbooks
- Curriculum
- Public school classes
- Transportation
- Testing fees

During the 2015-2016 school year, most of the funds were spent on private school tuition and fees. However, approximately 10 percent of funds were spent on services besides tuition and fees, according to data released by the

Mississippi Department of Education.⁶

Since Mississippi enacted the ESA, two other states have followed bringing the total number of states with ESA programs to five. This includes Nevada, which passed the most expansive school choice program in the country with a near-universal ESA available to every student currently enrolled in a district school. However, implementation was delayed due to two lawsuits. Earlier this year, the Nevada Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the ESA, but due to a technicality, the court found that the legislature had not properly appropriated the funding. Legislative leaders have pledged to address the funding issue during the next legislative session.

ESA Funding

During the first year of Mississippi's ESA program, the state allocated \$6,500 for each account. The law tied the value of future deposits to a portion of the base student cost of the Mississippi Adequate Education Program.

Because of a slight increase in the base student cost, the amount deposited into each account increased to \$6,637 per student for the 2016-2017 school year.

The program requires a line-item, general fund appropriation from the legislature each year. For the 2015-2016 school year, the legislature appropriated \$3 million. After the Department of Education received their appropriation to administer the program, 434 ESAs were available for the first school year even though the legislation authorized 500.

The legislation authorized for the program to add 500 new seats each year, which would bring the total to 1,000 for the second year. However, because the program was level-funded for the 2016-2017 school year, a slight increase in the value of the ESA deposits translated into a slight decrease in the number of ESAs available.⁷

School Choice Around The Country

At the beginning of the 2016 school year, there are 61 separate private school choice programs functioning in 31 states.⁸ Two new states (Maryland and South Dakota) enacted private school choice programs in 2016. There has been a rapid increase in the number of school choice programs available in just the past few years. About half of these choice policies have been enacted in just the past five years.

Moreover, many of the private school choice programs, including the three offered in Mississippi, are designed specifically for students with special needs.⁹ There were 12 active special needs programs across 10 different states during the 2015-2016 school year. (See Table 1 for enrollment data.) Three additional programs for students with special needs in Arkansas, South Carolina, and Tennessee, have been implemented in the past year but enrollment data is not yet available.

As with similar programs nationwide, enrollment in Mississippi's educational choice programs for students with special needs was initially quite low but has grown considerably. The low initial enrollment stems, to a great

extent, from the lack of awareness about the program's existence as well as the program's narrow windows in which to apply. However, as more people learn about these programs and how they work, they have grown steadily year-over-year

Private School Choice In Mississippi

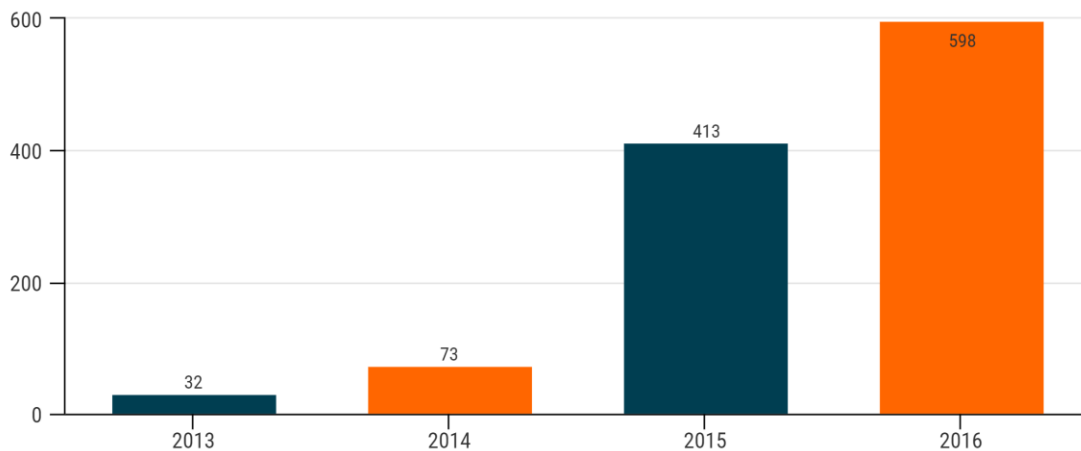
Mississippi currently offers three private educational choice programs, although the concept is still relatively new and limited in the state. Along with the Special Needs ESA, Mississippi also offers scholarships for students with dyslexia and speech therapy needs.

The Dyslexia Scholarship, which provides a voucher to students who have been properly screened and diagnosed with dyslexia equal to the base student of the Mississippi Adequate Education Program, was enacted in 2012 and serves 159 students as of the 2016-2017 school year.

This program requires participating schools to be accredited by the Department of Education, greatly limiting the number of participating schools. For the 2016-2017 school year, just three schools were participating in the program.

Table 1: Private school choice programs for students with special needs

State	First Year of Program	First Year Enrollment	Current Enrollment	Percent Change
Arizona	2009	115	349	203%
Florida (McKay)	2000	2	30,104	1,505,100%
Florida (Gardiner)	2015	1,627	4,270	162%
Georgia	2008	899	3,811	323%
Louisiana	2012	206	342	66%
Mississippi (Dyslexia)	2013	32	159	397%
Mississippi (ESA)	2015	251	425	70%
North Carolina	2014	276	611	121%
Ohio (Autism)	2004	70	3,193	4,461%
Ohio (Peterson)	2013	1,342	6,904	414%
Oklahoma	2011	6	377	6,183%
South Carolina	2014	405	1,066	163%
Utah	2006	107	700	554%

FIGURE 1 Private School Choice Enrollment In Mississippi

Enrollment in Mississippi's first private school choice program, the Dyslexia Scholarship, began in 2013. There are now three programs, including the Special Needs ESA, and enrollment has steadily increased over the past four years.

Similarly, the Speech Language Therapy (SLT) Scholarship allows students with speech language impairments to receive a voucher. This program was enacted in 2013 but has never served more than 14 children a year. Very few schools qualify to serve SLT scholarship students because the schools not only must be accredited by the state, but they also must have speech language therapy and intervention as the primary purpose of the school. Schools that serve students with multiple types of disabilities, including speech issues, may not be eligible even though they would meet the needs of students who qualify for the scholarships.

Although limited, the choice programs have experienced considerable growth. In the 2013-2014 school year, only 32 students in the state were enrolled in a private school choice program. But by the 2016-2017 school year, that number increased to 598 students.¹⁰ (See Figure 1 for data on the growth in private school choice enrollment in Mississippi.) This represents a 1,700 percent growth in student participation over that time period and a 45 percent growth over the past year alone.

Parental Satisfaction

There are numerous measures used to determine the quality of the education that a child is receiving, including standardized test scores, graduation rates, or accountability ratings. Using these measures, a near-consensus of the “gold standard” studies—those that employ random assignment to determine the causal impact of a policy—have found that students in a school choice program benefit academically from the new setting.¹¹

However, the most important and often overlooked measure is parental satisfaction. Parents are attuned to their child’s unique situation, learning needs, and educational progress in ways that cannot always be captured in test scores.

In every prior study that has asked about parental satisfaction, there has been one common theme: Parents were more satisfied with their child’s school if they were free to choose that school.¹²

A review of the voucher program in Cleveland found that “two-thirds of parents new to choice

schools reported being very satisfied with the academic quality of their child's school, as compared to fewer than 30 percent of parents with children in public schools."¹³

In a survey of parents nationwide whose children attend private school using some type of scholarship that reduces (or eliminates) tuition, "72 percent of scholarship-using parents gave their child's school a grade of A compared to just 16 percent of parents in the control group," which consisted of similar families in district schools.¹⁴

Other studies from Florida and Milwaukee have similar results. There is a clear relationship between empowering parents with the ability to choose their child's school and parents being satisfied with their child's school.

After all, parents in a school they choose have the ability to make another choice if they are not satisfied.

In many ways, parents are the ultimate accountability rating and that is why we believe understanding parental satisfaction with the Special Needs ESA program is so important in judging this program.

What follows is the results of a survey of 43 families who have a child participating in the Special Needs ESA (just over 10 percent of the total ESA population). Because respondents self-selected, we cannot say that their responses reflect the views of all ESA participants. Nevertheless, this report does provide a window into understanding how well the ESA program is working for many participating families.

Our findings are consistent with previous surveys: parents are overwhelmingly satisfied with the learning environments their children attend using the ESA funds.

FROM THE SURVEY: Student Characteristics

Survey respondents represented a range of ages and disabilities.

During the 2015-16 school year, participating ESA students were enrolled in kindergarten and grades one through nine. (See Table 2 for enrollment by grade.) No family in the survey indicated that their child was in grades 10-12 and no grade level accounted for a majority of students.

Intellectual Disability	3%
Orthopedic Impairment	2%
Other Health Impairment	20%
Specific Learning Disability	20%
Speech or Language Impairment	11%
Traumatic Brain Injury	3%
Visual Impairment	3%

Table 2: Enrollment By Grade

Grade	Percent of Program
Kindergarten	14%
First Grade	7%
Second Grade	12%
Third Grade	7%
Fourth Grade	12%
Fifth Grade	10%
Sixth Grade	14%
Seventh Grade	2%
Eighth Grade	12%
Ninth Grade	10%

Among the children of survey participants, 58 percent were male and 42 percent were female.

The students using the ESA have an array of special needs. There are 13 categories of special education as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), and the responses are broken down using those categories. Survey participants were able to identify multiple categories of special needs, if necessary.

Table 3: ESA Students' Special Needs

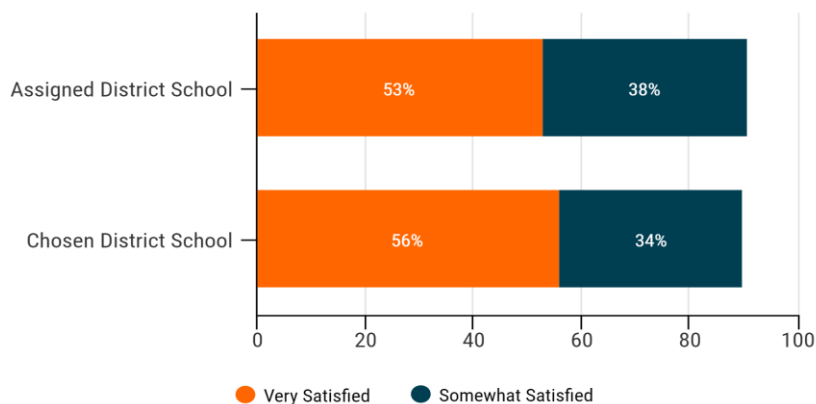
Special Needs	Percent of Survey Responses
Autism	19%
Emotional Disturbance	5%
Hearing Impairment	13%

FROM THE SURVEY: School Satisfaction Level

Around the country, district school satisfaction results, meaning those who say that they are somewhat or very satisfied, are slightly above 90 percent for both assigned district schools and district schools chosen through open enrollment policies.

Fifty-three percent of parents are very satisfied with their assigned district school and 38 percent are somewhat satisfied. Fifty-six percent are very satisfied with their chosen district school, while 34 percent are somewhat satisfied.¹⁵ (See Figure 2 for school satisfaction level for assigned and chosen district schools.)

FIGURE 2 Satisfaction level for assigned and chosen district schools



Source: Thomas D. Snyder, Cristobal de Brey, and Sally A. Dillow, Digest of Education Statistics 2014, NCES 2016-006 (Washington, DC: US Dept. of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016), p. 134, table 206.50, <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016006.pdf>.

Compared with the satisfaction level of district schools, ESA families were more satisfied overall and significantly more likely to be “very” satisfied with the new school or educational setting that their child is now using because of the ESA program. Ninety-eight percent of families expressed satisfaction with the school or program their child is currently in, including 71 percent who are very satisfied and 27 percent who are somewhat satisfied. By contrast, just two percent reported being somewhat unsatisfied with their child’s new educational setting. No families indicated they were very unsatisfied. (See Figure 3 for school satisfaction level of current ESA participants, next page.)

As for the previous school an ESA participant attended, 67 percent of families were unsatisfied. This includes 38 percent who were very unsatisfied and 29 percent who were somewhat unsatisfied. Nine percent

Feedback: Why Did You Enroll In The ESA?

“As a parent, I was looking for ways to help our daughter get the education she needs in a way that benefits her. The ESA program allowed us to go to a school that will benefit her and help her learn in a manner that works for her.”

“I wanted the best possible education that would help my daughter succeed in school. Being a teacher myself and living 45 minutes from the closest school to meet her needs, financial matters were an issue.”

“Both of our children were not growing academically in the public school system. It was a constant struggle to get the services they needed, even with a detailed IEP in place.”

“My child struggles so much to learn and we want her to have the best possible chance at an education.”

“To ensure that our son would receive the best possible education that appropriately fit his needs.”

were neither satisfied nor unsatisfied, while 19 percent were somewhat satisfied and five percent were very satisfied. (See Figure 4 for parental satisfaction level with their child's previous school.)

Parents also had a favorable opinion of the ESA program. Ninety-one percent of families are satisfied with the ESA program including 63 percent who are very satisfied and 28 percent

who are somewhat satisfied. Five percent were neither satisfied nor unsatisfied and another five percent were somewhat unsatisfied with the ESA program. Most of the problems identified, even from those who were satisfied with the program overall, stemmed from the application procedures, the process of signing up as a vendor, and the reimbursement process.

FIGURE 3 School satisfaction level of current ESA participants

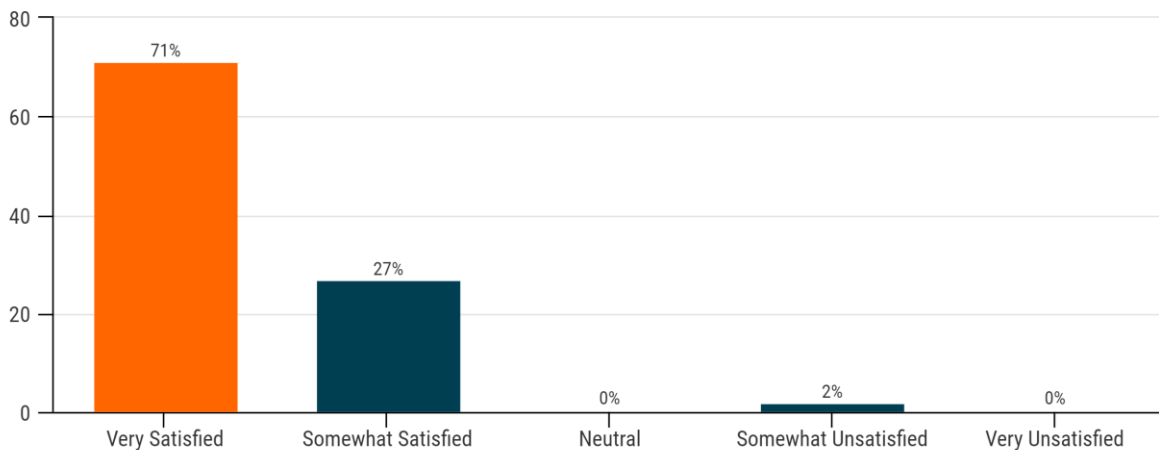
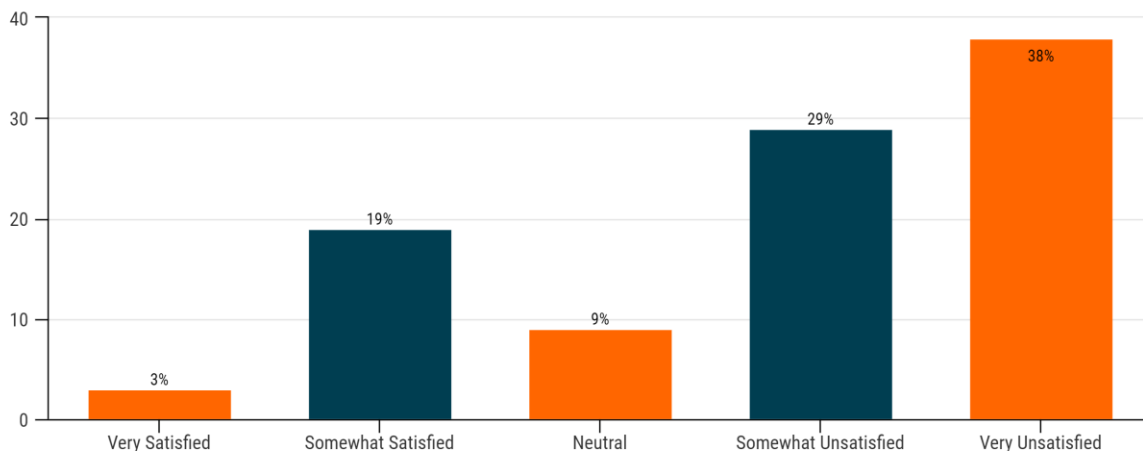


FIGURE 4 Satisfaction level with the previous school attended by current ESA participants



FROM THE SURVEY: Using The Program

Most families said that the Special Needs ESA program was relatively easy to use, and that they did not have problems with either applying for an ESA or receiving funds.

Eighty-nine percent of families said the application process was easy, including 37 percent that said the application process was very easy and 52 percent said it was somewhat easy. Two percent indicated that it was neither easy nor difficult. Eleven percent said it was difficult, including seven percent who said it was somewhat difficult and two percent that said it was very difficult. (See Figure 5 for parental views on the ease of the application process.)

Receiving funds in a timely fashion is one of the most important parts of the program and most said this process was fairly easy. Eighty-one percent of families said it was easy to receive funds, including 48 percent that said this was very easy and 33 percent that said it was somewhat easy. Ten percent said it was neither easy nor difficult. Nine percent said it was difficult, including two percent that said it was somewhat difficult and seven percent that said it was very difficult. (See Figure 6 for parental

views on the ease of receiving ESA funds, next page.)

This can partially be explained by those whose new schools were paid directly through the Department of Education versus those who were reimbursed for out-of-pocket expenses. Needing to figure out a way to pay up front and then be reimbursed is one obvious drawback for those without the funds to do so. According to the Department of Education, 15 schools were directly reimbursed for ESA participants while parents in 31 other schools were reimbursed for tuition payments during the 2015-2016 school year.

However, 51 percent of respondents in the survey said their school was directly reimbursed compared to 49 percent who were reimbursed for out-of-pocket expenses. This is likely due to the fact that the schools with the most participants, such as New Summit in Jackson or the 3-D School in Petal, offered direct reimbursement.

FIGURE 5 What ESA participants said about the ease of applying for the program

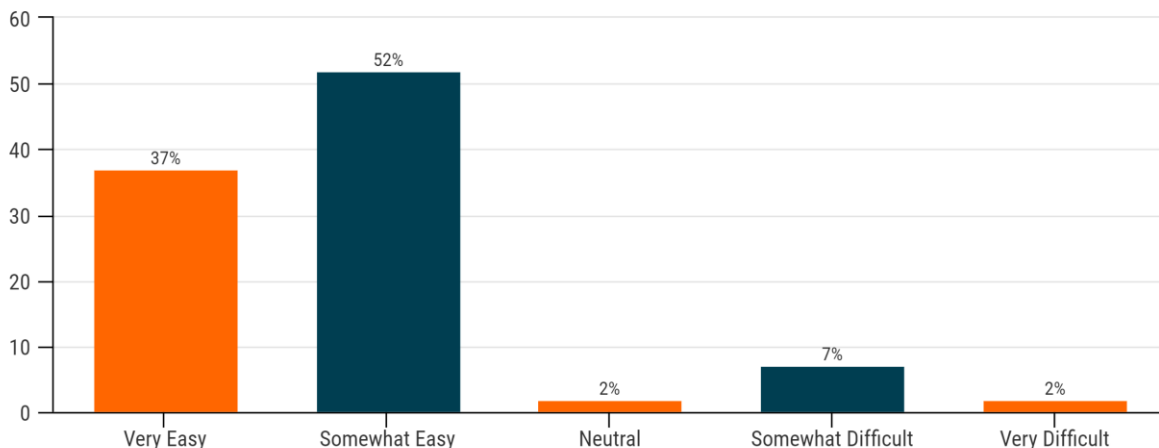
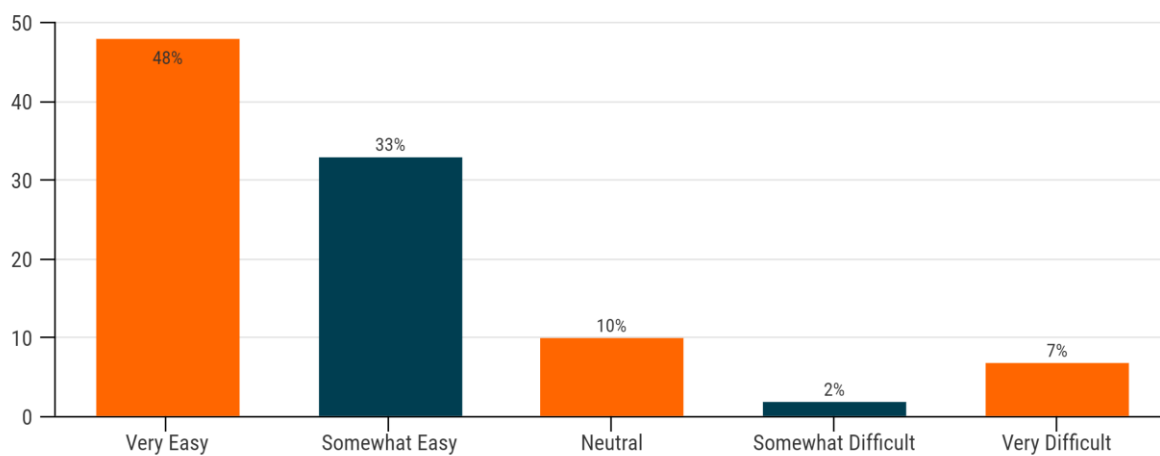


FIGURE 6 What ESA participants said about the ease of using ESA funds



Participating ESA Schools From The 2015-2016 School Year

During the 2015-2016 school year, students participating in the ESA program attended 46 different schools throughout the state of Mississippi.¹⁶

Participating schools include:

- ❖ Autism Center of North Mississippi (Tupelo, MS)
- ❖ Bodine School (Germantown, TN)
- ❖ Bowie Reading and Learning Center (Memphis, TN)
- ❖ Calvary Christian School (Meridian, MS)
- ❖ Canton Academy (Canton, MS)
- ❖ Central Academy (Macon, MS)
- ❖ Central Hinds Academy (Raymond, MS)
- ❖ Christ Covenant School (Ridgeland, MS)
- ❖ Christ Missionary and Industrial School (Jackson, MS)
- ❖ Christian Collegiate Academy (Gulfport, MS)
- ❖ Deer Creek School (Arcola, MS)
- ❖ Desoto Academy (Olive Branch, MS)
- ❖ Dynamic Dyslexia Design: 3-D School (Petal MS)
- ❖ Emmanuel Child Care & School (Jackson, MS)
- ❖ First Presbyterian Day School (Jackson, MS)
- ❖ Forest Trail Academy (Wellington, FL)
- ❖ French Camp Academy (French Camp, MS)
- ❖ Hebron Christian School (Pheba, MS)
- ❖ Heidelberg Academy (Heidelberg, MS)
- ❖ Helping Hands Learning Academy (Southaven, MS)
- ❖ Hillcrest Christian School (Jackson, MS)
- ❖ Holy Trinity Catholic School (Bay St. Louis, MS)
- ❖ Learning Skills Center (Tupelo, MS)
- ❖ Lee Academy (Clarksdale, MS)
- ❖ Lord of the Harvest/Hope Academy (Greenwood, MS)
- ❖ Madonna Learning Center (Germantown, TN)
- ❖ Magnolia Heights School (Senatobia, MS)
- ❖ Magnolia Speech School (Jackson, MS)
- ❖ Mother Goose Christian Academy (Jackson, MS)
- ❖ Mt. Salus Christian School (Clinton, MS)
- ❖ Nativity BVM Elementary School (Biloxi, MS)
- ❖ New Learning Resources (North New Summit - Greenwood)
- ❖ New Learning Resources (New Summit - Jackson)
- ❖ Newton County Academy (Decatur, MS)
- ❖ Northpoint Christian School (Southaven, MS)
- ❖ Our Lady of Fatima Catholic School (Biloxi, MS)
- ❖ Our Lady of Lourdes School (Greenville, MS)
- ❖ Porter's Chapel Academy (Vicksburg, MS)
- ❖ Resurrection Catholic School (Pascagoula, MS)
- ❖ St. Joseph Catholic School (Greenville, MS)
- ❖ St. Patrick Catholic School (Meridian, MS)
- ❖ St. Richard Catholic School (Jackson, MS)
- ❖ Sylva-Bay Academy (Bay Springs, MS)
- ❖ Trinity Preschool and Kindergarten (Jackson, MS)
- ❖ Tupelo Christian Preparatory School (Belden, MS)
- ❖ Willowood Development Center (Jackson, MS)

Feedback: Families talk about their new school!

"Our satisfaction goes beyond words. Our son left the public school system feeling defeated with zero confidence. He has gradually learned that he's not stupid and we feel like our child is coming back to life."

"We love it. My son has exceeded expectations. It was a perfect fit and allowed him to find his voice and in doing so he showed his intelligence!"

"100% satisfied. He has grown by leaps and bounds. There are only 4 children in his class so he gets the extra attention he needs and he can't get out of doing what's expected of him. He loves his school and said he never wants to go back to public school. He now has a huge chance of going to college and being truly successful in life."

"We are very satisfied with our children's current school. We have seen tremendous growth with both children. This program has been a true blessing to our family."

FROM THE SURVEY: ESA Program Information

Any new product or service requires a promotional campaign for people to learn about it before they can decide whether they like it or not. This is true whether a company is selling a product or a new government program has been launched. This is particularly true of an educational choice program when the default setting for most families is to enroll their child in the assigned district school.

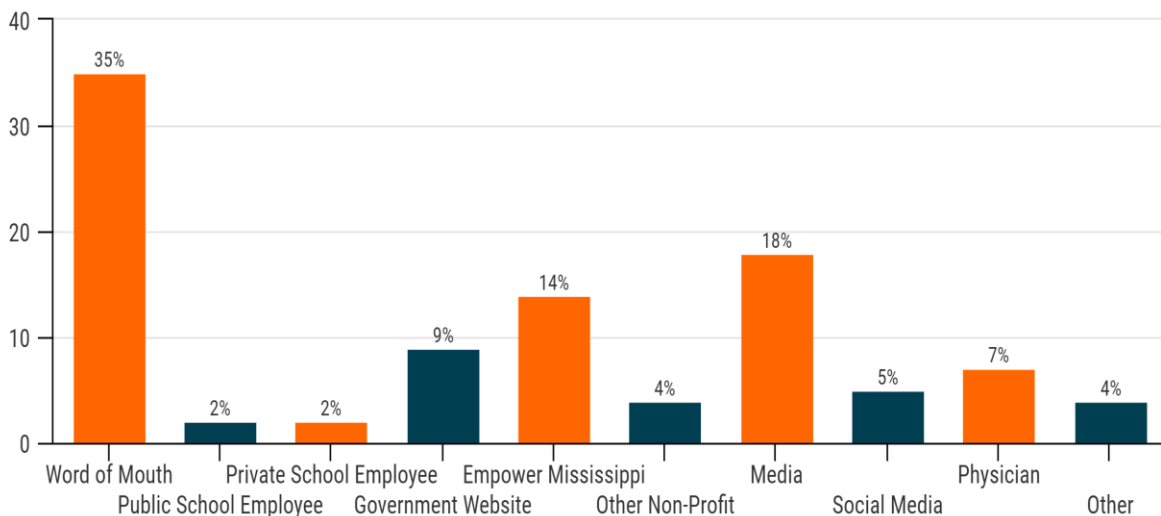
Unfortunately, few parents knew about the Special Needs ESA during its first year of operation. The narrow timeframe between when the program launched and the first day of school left little time to inform parents about the program or for those parents to apply for an ESA. The government did not spend any money to inform citizens about their options and there was little outreach to families who would benefit from the new program. Instead, participants heard about the program from a wide variety of other sources, particularly word

of mouth.

As shown in Figure 7, 35 percent of survey respondents found out about the ESA program through friends or family members. Eighteen percent heard about the program from the media (including television, radio, and newspapers) while 14 percent learned from Empower Mississippi.

The remaining families learned about the program from a government website (nine percent); therapist or physician (seven percent); social media (five percent); other non-profit organizations (four percent); other (four percent); a district school staff member (two percent); or a private school staff member (two percent).

FIGURE 7 How ESA participants found out about the program



Recommendations

Now in its second year of operation, the Special Needs ESA is highly regarded by participants in the program and has benefited many families. However, there are components of the program that could be improved to better serve current participants and reach new families.

Program funding:

- Funding for the program needs to be increased to match the number of seats authorized by the legislation. For the 2016-2017 school year, there is funding available for just 425 ESAs even though the legislation authorizes 1,000 seats in year two of the program.
- Since the scholarship amount per ESA automatically adjusts with respect to base student cost, funding also needs to be increased to match that increase.

Scholarship amount:

- For the 2016-2017 school year, participants received an ESA in the amount of \$6,637 regardless of the type of special needs. Although this amount meets the needs of some, it is too low to educate many children with severe disabilities. Scholarship amounts should scale with the severity of a disability.

Eligibility:

- The Special Needs ESA should be expanded to include any child with a disability and not just those with an IEP.
- Siblings of current participants should also be eligible for ESAs, as in other states, to make it easier for parents to enroll all their children in the same learning environment if they wish.
- We believe that this form of educational delivery should not be limited to students with special needs. Lawmakers

should continue to make improvements to this program as they have opportunity, but we hope they recognize that the ultimate goal should be to expand eligibility in the ESA program to every student in the state.

Program operations:

- The program is currently administered by the Department of Education, who has done a good job of managing it. However, they administer numerous programs in addition to the ESA. We recommend moving the administration to a non-profit, similar to the program in Florida. This will ensure that sufficient time, energy, and resources can be dedicated to the program.
- Families should be able to use a pre-loaded debit card designed for allowable education expenses only (similar to a teacher supply card), rather than force families to pay out of pocket and then wait for reimbursements.
- As in other states, leftover funds in individual accounts should be able to rollover from year-to-year to encourage saving and price-consciousness. If there are leftover funds upon graduation, the family should be able to use those funds for college.

Conclusion

When we began this survey at the end of the 2015-2016 school year, the ESA program was undersubscribed by approximately 200 participants. Today, the program is at full capacity of 425 participants (plus a waiting list of over 125) and that number is expected to grow as funding permits and parents continue to hear about the program. We believe that a regular surveying of parental satisfaction is important to understand how the program is working and what, if any, changes need to be made in the future.

After just one year, it is clear that the program is reaching its initial goal: to provide families who feel their needs are not being met in their assigned district school with another option in the education of their child. If judged by parental satisfaction it is an obvious and overwhelming success.

Survey Project and Profile

Title: ESA Parental Satisfaction Survey

Survey Organization: Empower Mississippi

Interview Dates: May to August 2016

Interview Method: Web survey using www.surveymonkey.com

Language(s): English

Sample Frame: Parents of students using education scholarship accounts in Mississippi

Sampling Method: Participants in this survey were not randomly selected. Participants were found via word-of-mouth, outreach to principals at schools with numerous students in the program, and outreach via social media. These methods were employed because there is no available database to reach all families. The self-selection of those who responded to the survey means that results cannot accurately be applied to all families. But this report does provide a reasonable sample on how well the ESA program is working for participating families.

Response Rate: 10 percent (43 out of 425)

Margin of Error: +/- 11 percentage points

Weighting: No

Oversampling: No

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Appendix: Survey Questions

Below are the questions asked of the survey participants:

1. Please identify all of the ways that you used the ESA funds during the 2015-2016 school year.
 - a. Private school tuition
 - b. Curriculum
 - c. Tutoring
 - d. Online classes
 - e. Textbooks
 - f. Education therapy
 - g. Testing Fees
 - h. Public school classes
 - i. Other (please specify)
 - b. Public school staff member
 - c. Private school staff member
 - d. Government website
 - e. Empower Mississippi
 - f. Other non-profit organization
 - g. Media (newspaper, radio, television)
 - h. Social media
 - i. Therapist/ Physician
 - j. Other (please specify)
2. How satisfied were you with the school or program your child used in the year before enrolling in the ESA program?
 - a. Very satisfied
 - b. Somewhat satisfied
 - c. Not satisfied or unsatisfied
 - d. Somewhat unsatisfied
 - e. Very unsatisfied
3. How satisfied are you with the school or program that your child is currently in through the ESA program?
 - a. Very satisfied
 - b. Somewhat satisfied
 - c. Not satisfied or unsatisfied
 - d. Somewhat unsatisfied
 - e. Very unsatisfied
4. How satisfied are you with the ESA program overall?
 - a. Very Satisfied
 - b. Somewhat satisfied
 - c. Not satisfied or unsatisfied
 - d. Somewhat unsatisfied
 - e. Very unsatisfied
5. How did you find out about the ESA program?
 - a. Friend of family member
6. How easy or difficult was it to apply for the ESA program?
 - a. Very easy
 - b. Somewhat easy
 - c. Neither easy or difficult
 - d. Somewhat difficult
 - e. Very difficult
7. How easy or difficult was it to use the ESA funds?
 - a. Very easy
 - b. Somewhat easy
 - c. Neither easy or difficult
 - d. Somewhat difficult
 - e. Very difficult
8. In using the ESA, were you reimbursed for out-of-pocket expenses or did the state send direct payment to the school attended by the ESA student?
 - a. Reimbursement
 - b. Direct payment
9. What is the ESA student's qualifying disability?
10. Which school does the ESA student attend?
11. What is the gender of the ESA student?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
12. In which grade is the ESA student?
 - a. Choose one
13. Why did you choose to enroll your child in

the ESA program?

14. Please describe your level of satisfaction with your child's current school or program.
15. What would you like to change about the ESA program?

Notes

¹ Jonathan Butcher and Jason Bedrick, "Schooling Satisfaction: Arizona Parents' Opinions on Using Education Savings Accounts," Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, October 2013, <http://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/SCHOOLING-SATISFACTION-Arizona-Parents-Opinions-on-Using-Education-Savings-Accounts-NEW.pdf>.

² Emily Le Coz, "In-depth report: Special education students failed by the state," *Clarion-Ledger*, February 2, 2014.

³ The program passed the Senate in 2014 but failed in the House on the final day of the session.

⁴ The program authorized 1,000 spots to be available for the second year but funding limited the program to just 425 spots.

⁵ See, for example, Matthew Ladner, "The Way of the Future: Education Savings Accounts for Every American Family," EdChoice, September 2012, <https://www.edchoice.org/research/the-way-of-the-future/>.

⁶ Mississippi Department of Education, Office of Special Education, Education Scholarship Account Program Quarterly Disbursement Report, May 11, 2016

⁷ With level funding, the number of spots available decreased from 434 to 425 because of the slight increase for each scholarship.

⁸ The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, "The ABCs of School Choice: The Comprehensive Guide to Every Private School Choice Program in America," 2016, <http://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/2016-ABCs-WEB-2.pdf>

⁹ Along with the Special Needs ESA, Mississippi also offers a Dyslexia Scholarship and Speech Language Therapy Scholarship. These programs provide a voucher to qualified students equal to the base student cost of the Mississippi Adequate Education Program.

¹⁰ This number would have been higher if the program funding matched the number of authorized seats for the Special Needs ESA.

¹¹ Greg Forster, "A Win-Win Solution: The Empirical Evidence of School Choice, Fourth Edition," Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, 2016, <http://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/A-Win-Win-Solution-The-Empirical-Evidence-on-School-Choice.pdf>

¹² Thomas Stewart and Patrick J. Wolf. *The School Choice Journey: School Vouchers and the Empowerment of Urban Families*. (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 31.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 31

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32

¹⁵ Thomas D. Snyder, Cristobal de Brey, and Sally A. Dillow, *Digest of Education Statistics 2014*, NCES 2016-006 (Washington, DC: US Dept. of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016), p. 134, table 206.50, <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016006.pdf>.

¹⁶ Mississippi Department of Education, Office of Special Education, Education Scholarship Account Program Quarterly Disbursement Report, May 11, 2016



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