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Summary:

Oregon should expand the role of parents in achieving better educational outcomes for their children. Parental choice is the future of education reform, and Education Savings Accounts are a fiscally responsible policy solution that can give all kids options now.

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“No one disputes the need for improvements to public schools. But children who need help today—first to learn the basics (like reading and math) and then to graduate from high school—should get the help they need now.”

Let Parents Wield School Spending Power

By Kathryn Hickok

Are we missing the trees for the forest in Oregon school funding and education reform debates?

Media reports, school districts, and political leaders usually focus on the big picture: reaching a 100% high school graduation rate so all children have the best chance in life. That’s a great goal. Frequently lost, however, is the fact that every child is an individual. The focus of real-life Oregon parents is helping their kids reach their potential in light of their specific needs and gifts.

These two perspectives shouldn’t be at odds. In fact, the second could drive the first—if more parents were empowered to make meaningful choices for their children’s education.

According to the National Education Association’s [Rankings and Estimates report for 2016 and 2017](#), counting local, state, and federal funding, current expenditures per Oregon student in Average Daily Attendance are estimated to be \$13,230, more than 33 other states. Adding in spending for capital outlays and interest payments, that number increases to \$14,911 per student.

Yet, the [National Association of Education Progress](#) reports that only [34% of Oregon fourth-graders](#) tested “proficient” in reading in 2015; and [Oregon has the third-worst high school graduation rate](#) in the country.

No one disputes the need for improvements to public schools. But children who need help today—first to learn the basics (like reading and math) and then to graduate from high school—should get the help they need now. What we ought to do is give Oregon students [the power of choice](#) to find their own paths to success.

For lower-income parents, the stakes are high. [Nearly half the children born into poverty](#) will stay in poverty as adults. Key to changing that outcome is an education that leads to high school graduation and future employment. Unlike parents with greater means, who can move to another neighborhood or pay out-of-pocket for private schools, lower-income parents often find their children trapped in public schools that do not meet their kids’ needs. Education Savings Accounts could change that.

Six years ago, Arizona became the first state to pass an Education Savings Account (ESA) law for some K-12 students, and it [recently expanded eligibility](#) to eventually include all Arizona children. Florida, Mississippi, and Tennessee also have ESA programs limited to certain students, such as those with special needs.



An ESA is analogous to a limited-use debit card for qualifying education expenses. It gives parents who want to opt out of a public school a portion of the per-student state funding to spend on their child's education in other ways. ESAs can fund a wide variety of education-related expenses, including tuition, tutoring, and supplemental materials. Money not used in one year can be rolled over for future education expenses, even college.

But if ESAs let parents spend education funds outside the public school system, would ESAs drain money from public schools? Not necessarily. Schools are funded by local, state, and federal money. ESAs would be funded by only part of the state component. The amount of the ESA deposits is negotiable and [would be the biggest driver of their fiscal impact](#).

Legislators can design an ESA program [so that it would be revenue neutral](#) to public schools, or even create a net increase per student who remained in the system. If students leaving public schools took less funding with them than would have been spent if they had remained, schools could reduce their class sizes without a negative impact on per-student funding.

No one can craft a school system that meets every child's needs. Statistical data analysis and bureaucratic goal-setting can't ensure that any particular child makes it to high school graduation or excels in a career. But most parents are keenly aware of their own children's needs. Giving parents power to find the right fit for their kids would make a world of difference, as any parent knows.

Focusing on the forest (the public school system), Oregon is missing the trees (kids). We should expand the role of parents in achieving better educational outcomes for their children. We've tried everything else. Parental choice is the future of education reform, and Education Savings Accounts are a fiscally responsible policy solution that can give all kids options now.

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