

## **Alabama State Legislators Propose a Bill That Rivals HB290 in Ohio**

House Bill 290, pending in the Ohio Legislature, would provide a voucher for every student which, could be used in a variety of private entities, as well as the public system.

The bill proposed in Alabama would have the same effect.

Powerful forces throughout the nation are campaigning to redirect all public education funds from the common school system to parents of students. What is so sinister about this movement is that their endgame is to phase-out all tax funds for education; hence, parents would eventually pay for the education of their own children.

### **Alabama lawmakers eye creation of ‘ultimate’ parent choice, education savings legislation**

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Sen. Del Marsh, R-Anniston, on Tuesday will file what he calls the “ultimate” school choice bill. The proposed bill would allow parents to access money that the state would have used to pay for their child’s public education – approximately \$6,300 last year – and direct it to other types of schooling, including private school and homeschool options.

“There’s an overwhelming desire across this country and Alabama as well by parents wanting to make more decisions for their children’s education,” Marsh told AL.com Monday. “This is the ultimate bill to do that. It allows a parent to choose public school, private school, homeschool, a combination of vocational school — it puts that power in the parents’ hands.”

“COVID brought to light a lot of problems in education,” he continued. “In the times we live in, there are so many choices. And parents should have control over those choices.”

Eight states currently have laws allowing Education Savings Accounts – the mechanism through which the money is accessed. According to EdChoice, which supports and tracks school choice programs nationwide, around 31,000 students are using ESAs in all eight states combined.

ESAs are akin to vouchers, allowing funds to be accessed directly by families but differ from vouchers in that ESAs can be used to pay for more than tuition.

In previous years, Marsh sponsored legislation that created public charter schools and a tax credit scholarship program, which routes tax-deductible contributions through a third party, for income-eligible students. An expansion effort failed in the last session. This year, around 3,000 low-income students utilize tax credit scholarships to attend private schools and public schools they aren’t zoned to attend.

Alabama currently has eight public charter schools enrolling around 3,000 students this year.

Marsh said he’s confident Alabama can afford the program, pointing to \$3 billion in federal funding and the largest ever amount of money in the Education Trust Fund.

Alabama spends more money on education than some of the surrounding states, he said. “But our students are last in math and reading.”

According to an Education Week analysis that considered differences in cost-of-living, Alabama spent more than Tennessee, Florida, Mississippi and North Carolina during the 2018-19 school year.

The latest spending figures, from the 2019-20 school year, show Alabama spent \$10,125 per student, which includes state, local and federal funding.

“It’s not all about the money,” he continued. “It’s about how you use your dollars. And I think it’s time for the parents to have a decision in that choice.”

Parents being able to direct dollars to the education they choose for their children creates competition, Marsh said. “It makes the public schools better.”

Under Marsh’s bill, the first ESAs would be available at the start of the 2022-23 school year. It would allow any students who are currently enrolled in public school or in a homeschool to sign up for an ESA. Applications would be made available May 1 according to the bill.

The eligible student pool grows in 2023-24 to include students in private schools whose family income does not exceed 200% of the federal poverty level.

All students become eligible during the 2024-25 school year.

Parents who want their child to participate must sign an agreement with the governing board of the Parents’ Choice Program agreeing to use funds only for eligible expenses and to provide an education for their child in reading, language, math, science and social studies.

Schools and other education service providers that want to receive ESA funds must agree to participate. That includes providing the number of spots available and the process for enrolling students. Students receiving tax credit scholarships are also eligible for ESAs, according to the bill.

Participating parents are encouraged to offer their child enrichment opportunities as well, including fine arts and sports. The Alabama High School Athletic Association retains control over student eligibility for sports, according to the bill.

Failure to comply with the rules of the program can result in an education service provider being barred from future participation. A student’s ESA can be closed if parents do not comply with the rules.

While the state does not keep count of the number of students in private schools and in homeschools, Marsh told Alabama Daily News approximately 60,000 students attend private schools, and another 10,000 students are enrolled in a homeschool program.

Around 725,000 students are enrolled in public schools this year.

Rep. Charlotte Meadows, R-Montgomery, is carrying an identical bill in the House. She, too, said the time is right for this kind of school choice in Alabama. “We should have done something along these lines last year when parents were being so put out,” she said.

“They were really having to do their own thing across the state in many school systems with their own children, educate their own children and they were doing it on their own dollar.”

Public school parents have been vocal about their frustration with schooling options since the pandemic began, and for various and sometimes opposite reasons.

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Some were upset because of mandated student masking requirements while others were upset because they wanted masking to be mandatory. Some parents wanted schools to go fully remote during surges of the delta and omicron variants while others wanted schools to remain fully open for in-person instruction even during the surges.

“Parents have been shut out of the process,” she said, “and didn’t really have any choice when the schools said we’re going to go virtual tomorrow.”

“We’re going to need parents to really think about what’s the best setting, option, class size. Those types of things are different from school system to school system and from school to school.”

Meadows said she expects homeschool parents to be among the first to sign up. “They’ve never gotten a dime. And honestly, there’s not a reason that I can see for them not to just sign up, take their share of their state money and continue to homeschool their kids with it.”

Marsh is confident he has support for this bill and expects the Senate Education Policy committee to approve it Wednesday. “I would ask the question to any lawmaker: do you think a parent should have a choice in their child’s education? I would be very hesitant as a lawmaker to say no.”

“This bill truly gives control to parents, and that’s what they want.”

Alabama Parents Choice Act ... by Trisha Powell Crain

Updated 2:00 p.m. to remove characterization of ESAs as neovouchers. We apologize for the error.

<https://www.al.com/news/2022/01/alabama-lawmakers-eye-creation-of-ultimate-parent-choice-education-savings-legislation.html>