

Jan Resseger Issues a Warning to Ohioans Regarding Universal Vouchers Based on How Arizona Elected Official Thwarted the Will of Arizona Citizens

As Ms. Resseger points out, the Arizona legislature, in 2017, tried to expand a small Education Savings Account (ESA) voucher scheme to over one million students. A public education advocacy group—Save Our Schools Arizona—in 2018 collected sufficient signatures to put the issue on the ballot. The folks in Arizona blocked the voucher expansion by a 65% majority. After the citizens of Arizona blocked the voucher law, state officials expanded the requirements for a referendum.

In July of 2022, a universal voucher bill became law in Arizona. Because of the increased requirement for putting the issue on the statewide ballot, petitioners were not able to get the issue on the ballot.

Save Our Schools Arizona Falls Short in Attempt to Block Implementation of New ESA Vouchers

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Here is a cautionary tale for those of us who live in states like [Ohio, where legislators are considering](#) a bill that would provide state-funded, universal, Education Savings Account (ESA) school vouchers.

On Friday, the *Wall Street Journal's* [Alicia Caldwell reported](#): “The country’s largest school voucher program has become law in Arizona after voucher opponents failed to collect enough valid voter signatures to put the issue before voters in 2024, the Arizona Secretary of State’s office said Friday. The state’s expanded voucher program will allow any kindergarten through high school student to receive \$7,000 a year for private school tuition, home schooling, tutoring, or other educational expenses. The state’s Republican-led legislature passed the law earlier this year and Republican Gov. Doug Ducey signed it in July.”

In an article that is absolutely essential reading for public school supporters, *SALON's* [Kathryn Joyce explains](#) that, in 2017, Arizona’s legislature tried to expand a smaller Education Savings Account voucher program to over a million students, but in 2018, [Save Our Schools Arizona](#), an alliance of parents and other public school supporters, mounted a ballot referendum against the move. The 2018 referendum blocked the ESA voucher expansion by a 65 percent majority.

Backed by groups like the Goldwater Institute and Betsy DeVos’s American Federation for Children, however, Arizona’s legislature tried again this year, successfully enacting an Education Savings Account universal school voucher program. Save Our Schools Arizona once again set out to collect enough signatures for a referendum to block the program, but this time the effort failed.

Caldwell reports that the new ESA vouchers will be immediately available: “The Education department said Friday that any voucher application filed by the end of the day will be eligible to receive funding—roughly \$7,000 per school year—starting in October... About 85,000 students are thought to be home-schooled or enrolled in private schools around the state. Students enrolled in public schools aren’t eligible for the voucher.” Public school parents can, however, qualify if they withdraw the children from public schools.

[Kathryn Joyce explores](#) what kind of educational services the new ESA vouchers will buy and the program's likely impact: "Under the new law, any Arizona parent who opts their children out of public school will receive a debit card with an average balance of just under \$7,000, which they can use to spend on almost any educational needs they choose, from private school tuition to homeschooling expenses to buying computers to hiring private teachers for 'microschools.' Public education advocates immediately warned that such a huge transfer of public funds to private hands could be the death knell for public schools, which would likely have to make untenable cuts to teaching staff and school programs. Since applications for ESAs opened in mid-August, the Arizona Department of Education says that close to 10,000 parents have signed up, nearly doubling the roughly 12,000 Arizona students who were already using the program last year. But as of last week, Capitol Media Services reported that 75% of the new applications were for students not currently enrolled in public schools, prompting Arizona superintendent of public instruction Kathy Hoffman to charge that the ESA expansion was becoming 'a taxpayer-funded coupon for the wealthy,' effectively subsidizing the cost of private-school tuition for parents who could already afford to pay."

It is projected that the annual cost of the ESA voucher program would grow rapidly. Caldwell reports: "The state's Joint Legislative Budget Committee (has) estimated that the expanded voucher program could cost the state an additional \$33.4 million in this budget year, which ends in June. In 2024, that could rise to about \$64.5 million and as much as \$125.4 million in 2025. The committee has said those estimates are speculative, and based on new costs."

In her article, written before this year's deadline for signature collection, Joyce reports that, after the 2018, Save Our Schools Arizona referendum blocked the expansion of ESA vouchers, the governor and the legislature took steps to complicate the collection of signatures for any future referendum: "The signature threshold is significantly higher than the 76,000 required for the 2018 referendum, and Ducey's decision to wait 10 days to sign the ESA expansion into law meant the referendum campaign has had only 80 days to gather the required signatures. Recent legislation and trends at the state Supreme Court have also made the process of getting those signatures approved a riskier bet. Once the signatures are turned in... they will come under intense scrutiny from groups supporting the ESA expansion, including the Goldwater Institute and the American Federation for Children...."

Joyce adds that this year, the ESA school voucher referendum also became highly politicized, with well funded groups mounting hostile opposition to the efforts of Save Our Schools Arizona: "(T)he final weeks of petition gathering... turned hostile, as groups backed by the Goldwater Institute and American Federation for Children... launched a massive 'Decline to Sign' campaign, holding protests at petition gathering spots, urging supporters to call businesses near petition sites to complain that 'this is hurting our children's education' and videotaping both petition circulators and voters who sign, posting clips of those interactions online. In this atmosphere, petition volunteers say they've been surrounded, harassed, and followed for blocks on end, while pro-ESA protesters say they've been insulted or sworn at by referendum supporters... The pro-ESA protesters also enjoy the support of numerous prominent Republicans... Arizona's Republican gubernatorial nominee, Kari Lake, stood with 'Decline to Sign' advocates...."

On Friday, [Save Our Schools Arizona conceded](#), expressing sadness about its volunteers' inability to block the program's implementation: "Today, Arizona's public schools were dealt a devastating blow. The universal ESA voucher scheme passed by the Republican-controlled legislature and signed by Governor Ducey has gone into effect despite our network's herculean effort to stop it.... The Secretary of State's office has reviewed the petitions our campaign turned in and has determined that we fell short of the minimum signature threshold.... (T)he discrepancy was influenced by several factors, including the incredibly high volume of returns of petitions in the final week, days, and hours of the campaign. Our grassroots campaign relied on hand counts and volunteer hours, in stark contrast to deep-pocketed special interests like the Goldwater Institute who use sophisticated software to further their goal of dismantling public education in Arizona... The decision by Ducey and the Legislature to enact this dangerous law is further proof that they have abandoned their constitutional obligation to provide adequate resources for public school students."

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