



Advancing School Choice through Military Educational Savings Accounts

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Background

Every child deserves the chance for a good, individualized education that can prepare him or her for a job and a bright future. What is sorely needed in education policy is not rigid federal government control but parent and student choice. Federal government intervention in elementary and secondary education has been growing for over half a century, during which time education spending has [skyrocketed](#) (on a per-student basis, federal spending on K-12 education has nearly tripled in real terms since 1970) and programs and regulations have ballooned. Yet the current public school system is failing far too many parents in terms of school satisfaction and far too many children in terms of student academic performance and outcomes. All parents deserve to send their children to the school or educational provider of their choice.

School Choice

Conservatives are winning the debate on [school choice](#) at the state and local levels. Reforms adopted by states and school districts across the country increasingly reflect positive outlooks for K-12 education. More than half of states have [created options](#) for parents in recognition that choice (rather than monopolistic residential assignment schooling) provides better opportunities for all families, especially families with children with special needs.

Education Savings Accounts

As The Heritage Foundation [notes](#), a growing body of literature finds that school choice is associated with parental satisfaction, student safety, academic achievement, and increased graduation rates. An innovative school choice financing option known as Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) has seen great [success at the state level](#). Arizona was the first state to establish ESAs: every quarter since 2011, the state government has deposited up to 90 percent of the base support level of state funding into a parent-controlled ESA for eligible students. Parents can then use that money to pay for a variety of educational options including private-school tuition, private tutoring, special education services, homeschooling expenses, textbooks, and virtual education, enabling them to customize an education for their child's unique needs. Parents may also roll over funds from year to year, and they can use the money to invest in college savings plans to pay for college tuition in the future.

Military ESAs

The schooling options available to children of military families can play a significant role in whether a family accepts an assignment, even factoring into decisions to leave military service altogether. Yet more than half of all active-duty military families live in states with no school choice options at all. According to a recent [survey](#), 35 percent of respondents said that dissatisfaction with their child's education was a "significant factor" in their decision to remain in or leave military service. As noted in a Heritage Foundation [report](#), the Pentagon's changes to policy in 2016 enabling families to remain at duty stations for longer time periods was a direct response "to complaints by military parents who are loathe to move if the next duty station has poorly performing schools. Those complaints stem from the fact that military-connected children are too often assigned to the district schools closest in proximity to military bases, regardless of whether those schools meet their needs.

Solution

Providing education choice to families in uniform is a national security issue. Since the federal government has exclusive responsibility to provide for the national defense, the education of military connected children has a special place at the Department of Education. Congress should transition funding for a federal program known as the Impact Aid program into ESAs for children from military families. This would provide children of active-duty military families with education choice, while ensuring the federal program serves military families as well as they serve the nation. Since it pertains to the U.S. military, the Impact Aid program represents one of the few federal education programs that have a constitutional warrant. Instead of filtering its current \$1.3 billion in federal funding to district schools, and then assigning students to those schools based on where their parents are stationed, Impact Aid dollars should be directed to military ESAs. A military family could then choose to use the account to pay for any education-related service, product, or provider that meets the specific needs of their child.

Conclusion

The U.S. military is primarily funded by the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), an annual bill that sets policies and budgets for the U.S. Department of Defense. This bill and the defense appropriations bill are Congress's two annual major pieces of defense legislation. As mentioned above, Impact Aid pertains to the U.S. military and has a constitutional basis that should be funded as defense spending. The NDAA presents the best possible vehicle for this policy and its funding. Heritage Action and conservatives are dedicated to including Military ESAs on this year's NDAA.