

# Opinions

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POINT/COUNTERPOINT

## Senate Bill 1452

SB 1452 would expand the state's Empowerment Scholarship Accounts (ESA) school voucher program. The ESA is an account administered by The Arizona Department of Education that is funded by state tax dollars to provide educational options for qualified Arizona students. By opting out of the public school system, parents can seek a range of alternative educational services, such as private school or home-based education.

### Arizona voucher bill anti-democratic, anti-education, and threat to religious freedom

By **ANDREW L. SEIDEL**

Special to the Courier

The Arizona state Senate has passed a bill undermining the will of the people.

SB 1452 would siphon funds from students in public schools and direct it toward students attending private religious schools. Two-thirds of Arizona's 1.1 million public school students would become eligible for these vouchers, a huge expansion of the Empowerment Scholarship Accounts now serving less than 10,000 students.

Under the scheme, parents receive 90 percent of the tax funds that would go to their student's school district. Some students with disabilities can receive as much as \$40,000 per year.

The proposed program is anti-democratic and elitist. Arizona voters by a 2-1 margin rejected an expansion of the school voucher program two years ago.

And the scheme will not work. This has been proven time after time, in study after study. A 2018 study showed that Arizona's vouchers don't rescue children from struggling schools; they simply help the rich pay for private school.

Another study revealed that families were often simply sitting on the

money, with \$50,000 and even \$100,000 in their accounts.

Such programs are ripe for fraud, self-dealing and abuse, as the New York Times reported about Arizona's existing scheme a few years ago. While the bill is hailed by some as a helpline for students with disabilities, private religious schools can discriminate against those students — and LGBTQ students, and anyone else they deem unworthy. Taxpayers shouldn't be funding discrimination.

Our public school system should receive unequivocal support. If we want better schools, the solution is not to privatize but to make our public schools better. That alone is reason to abandon this program, but so is the unspoken, insidious rationale underlying much school choice activism: that it is often a fig leaf for eroding public education in favor of religious education. Kyle Olson, creator and chair of National School Choice Week, has written: "I would like to think that, yes, Jesus would destroy the public education temple and save the children from despair and a hopeless future." Nearly all voucher schools are religious, including approximately 90 percent of the recipients of voucher money in Arizona.

Last month, we cele-

brated Religious Freedom Day, the day that the Virginia Assembly passed the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. In that law, Thomas Jefferson explained that "to compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves and abhors, is sinful and tyrannical."

A secular government cannot force Muslims to bankroll temples and yeshivas; compel Jews to subsidize Christian churches and Catholic schools; oblige Christians to fund mosques and madrassas; or nonbelievers to support any religious education.

The Arizona Legislature must not proceed down this anti-democratic, anti-education and anti-religious freedom path.

*Andrew L. Seidel (@AndrewLSeidel), an attorney and author, is the director of strategic response at the Freedom From Religion Foundation, a national state/church separation organization with more than 33,500 members and several chapters nationwide, including hundreds of members and a chapter in Arizona. Seidel is the author of the recently published book The Founding Myth: Why Christian Nationalism Is Un-American.*

### ESAs give parents hope before, after, and during the pandemic

By **JONATHAN BUTCHER**

Special to the Courier

Parents in Arizona and across the country are starting to put COVID-19 behind them. It's a good time to take stock of what worked—what offered families some sense of normalcy and hope during the pandemic—and what did not.

Take education. Millions of students nationally and tens of thousands of students in-state either had no learning over the last year or saw their grades suffer due to ad hoc virtual instruction.

But a proposal to allow more parents to customize their child's learning experience demonstrates that Arizona lawmakers aren't ignoring their plight.

The proposal, which would expand the state's Empowerment Scholarship Accounts to children from low-income families, recognizes the potential these accounts bring to families from all walks of life to help their children succeed, regardless of their circumstances.

With an ESA, the state deposits a portion of a child's funds from the education formula into a private account that parents can use to purchase education products and services such as textbooks and private school tuition. Since 2011,

Arizona's accounts have helped thousands of students all over the state, including children with special needs and children assigned to failing schools, choose how and where they learn.

During the pandemic, this flexibility was nothing short of essential. Families of children with special needs in North Carolina have access to similar accounts, and they continued their children's therapies and other support services when schools closed to in-person instruction.

One parent, Liz Bradford, said last year that her daughter was able to keep up with different services thanks to an account even when assigned schools could not offer services. "There is some normalcy," thanks to their ESA, Liz said. One Arizona family using an account said they could "still find excitement in the world around us," even with the learning conditions forced on them by the pandemic.

The traditional system was sorely lacking anything that could be considered "normal," never mind exciting. According to one report, some 3 million children from low-income families around the U.S. have not had any formal schooling since March of last year. Reports from Arizona, California, Virginia and

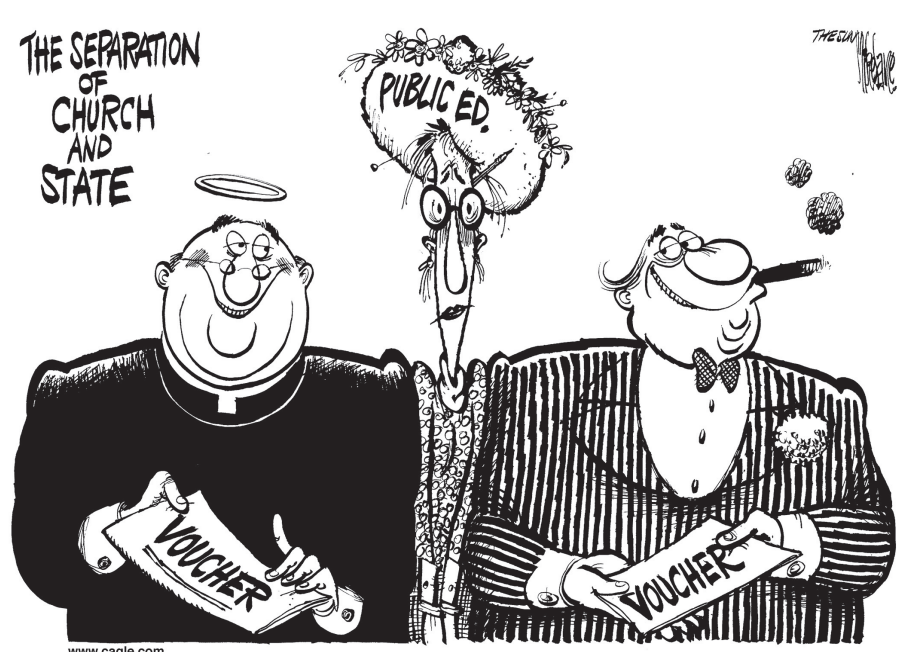
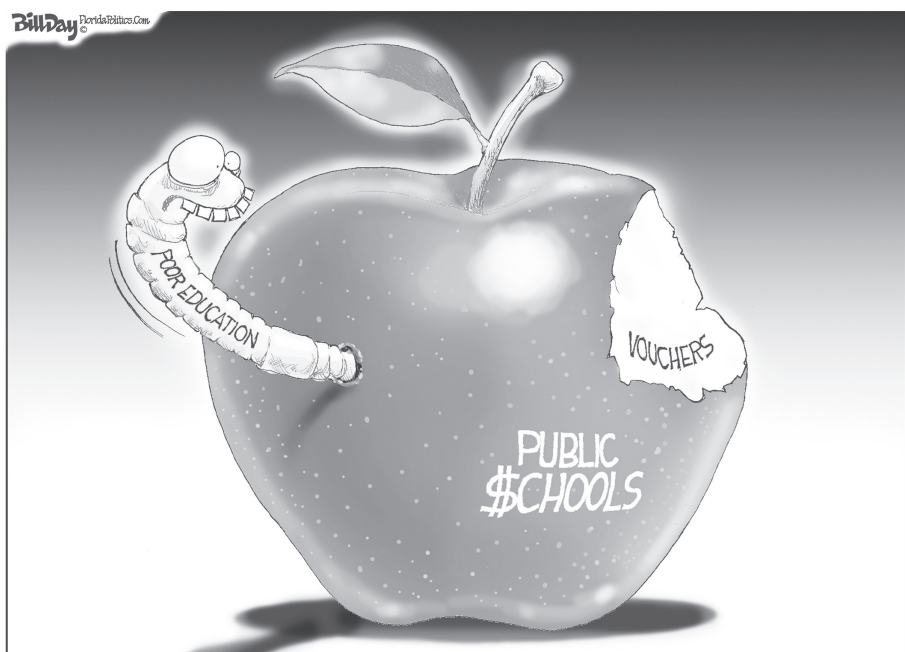
other areas of the country found a significant uptick in the number of students earning failing grades in the fall.

Meanwhile, many private schools, including 90 percent of Catholic schools, have been open for in-person learning for much of this school year while district schools were only online.

In Arizona, early reviews of student enrollment in the 2020-2021 school year find that district schools simply were not meeting student needs, especially in the younger grades. As Heritage Foundation research pointed out earlier this year, the drop in kindergarten enrollment in Mesa Unified, Arizona's largest school district, is almost the same in percentage terms as the share of students in all grades who are attending charter schools in the state. Some 50,000 Arizona children were missing from schools as of last October.

These children gone missing need help now. Students consistently succeeding should be what we consider "normal"—and the accounts can give every child this opportunity.

*Jonathan Butcher is the Will Skillman Fellow in Education at The Heritage Foundation's Center for Education Policy.*



### Our Readers Speak ...

#### Green cesspools

Editor:

We have lived in Prescott for 10 years. What we enjoy the most about living here are the recreational activities that this beautiful area provides. However, as a devoted kayaker, it has been terribly disappointing to watch our lakes turn into green cesspools as the summer progresses.

As the water is dispersed and the algae grows, kayaking turns into a very unpleasant experience. I know that drought plays a major role.

Nevertheless, aren't our lakes a major draw for the tourists we hope will visit.

It makes sense to me that less water

should be released when the lakes become low. After all, aren't they the jewels in the beauty of Prescott?

Dorna Christell  
Prescott

#### A vaccine appointment, but...

Editor:

I have been reading the fawning letters to the editor concerning the ease with which the writers were able to receive their COVID-19 vaccinations at the old Sears building. I agree, my wife and I were able to breeze right through the process. We also met some very nice, helpful people.

But, and there is always a "but," the

only reason we were able to get our vaccinations was through the intervention on our behalf of influential individuals. We had spent months, literally, navigating the various websites in attempts to get an appointment.

A friend, who had influence in the community, heard of our frustration and contacted a friend on our behalf who had more influence. We received a phone from the person of influence mid-morning on Monday who requested our names, address, dates of birth, and e-mail address. Within minutes, we received e-mails confirming our appointments that same afternoon. We finally got our vaccinations and received firm appointments for our second shots. It is

nice to have influential friends.

Charles Naretto  
Prescott

#### Excellent vaccine visit

Editor:

A shout out to the vaccine administrators at Gateway Mall in the old Sears Building! My husband and I had our second shots yesterday. Everyone was so friendly and accommodating. There was no waiting, and I even got a lollipop from the handsome firefighter who gave me the shot! I believe Dignity Health is responsible for this excellent planning.

Marilyn Koprowski  
Prescott

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# The Daily Courier

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