

**Testimony by Timothy Benson, Policy Analyst  
Before the Oregon Senate Education Committee  
Tuesday, June 13, 2017<sup>1</sup>**

Good morning Chairman Roblan and members of the committee. I thank you for the opportunity to address you on this important issue. My name is Timothy Benson. I am a policy analyst at The Heartland Institute, a nonprofit, nonpartisan, national think tank headquartered in Arlington Heights, Illinois.

One of the main issues Heartland has focused on since its founding in 1984 is private education choice. Education savings accounts are considered “the way of the future”<sup>2</sup> in the education-choice movement, because they provide greater freedom and flexibility for families and fewer state constitutional barriers than voucher programs.

If the Educational Opportunity Act is established, Oregon would become the sixth state in the country to set up an education savings account (ESA) program, following Arizona in 2011, Florida in 2014, and Mississippi, Tennessee, and Nevada in 2015. Passing the Educational Opportunity Act would put Oregon at the forefront of the education-choice movement.

In May 2016, EdChoice released a report in which it examined 100 empirical studies of school choice programs. Eighteen of these studies used random assignment to measure outcomes, referred to in academia as the “gold standard.” According to the EdChoice report, “Students who apply for a voucher enter randomized lotteries to determine who will receive the voucher and who will remain in a public school; this allows researchers to track very similar ‘treatment’ and ‘control’ groups, just like in medical trials.”<sup>3</sup> The overwhelming majority of the available empirical evidence shows education choice offers families equal access to high-quality schools that meet their widely diverse needs and desires, and, according to the research, it does so at a lower cost. EdChoice also found education choice also benefits public school students.

Not only are education-choice options good policy, they are also broadly popular. A 2013 survey of Arizona’s ESA program found not a single parent “responded as neutral or reported any level of dissatisfaction with the accounts.”<sup>4</sup> Ninety-one percent of parents enrolled in Mississippi’s

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this testimony were previously published by the author as *Research & Commentary: Universal ESA Bill Could Make Oregon a National Leader in Education Choice* on February 14, 2017, <https://www.heartland.org/publications-resources/publications/research--commentary-universal-esa-bill-could-make-oregon-a-national-leader-in-education-choice>

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Ladner, “The Way of the Future: Educations Savings Accounts for Every American Family,” EdChoice, October 2012, <https://www.edchoice.org/research/the-way-of-the-future/>

<sup>3</sup> Greg Forster, “A Win-Win Solution: The Empirical Evidence on School Choice – Fourth Edition,” EdChoice, May 18, 2016, <http://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/A-Win-Win-Solution-The-Empirical-Evidence-on-School-Choice.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Butcher and Jason Bedrick, “Schooling Satisfaction: Arizona Parents’ Opinions on Using Education

program report they are satisfied with their ESA.<sup>5</sup>

Education-choice programs are in demand across the country. Polling conducted in April by Gallup shows 59 percent of registered voters, including 46 percent of Democrats, are in favor of “[providing] federal funding for school choice programs that allow students to attend any private or public school.”<sup>6</sup> These results buttress an American Federation for Children national poll from January 2017 that found 68 percent of likely voters, including 72 percent of African-Americans and 75 percent of Latinos, favor allowing parents to have “the right to use the tax dollars associated with their child’s education to send their child to the public or private school which better serves their needs.”<sup>7</sup> Further, 69 percent of respondents supported ESA programs.<sup>8</sup>

Only 37 percent of Oregon 4th graders<sup>9</sup> and 34 percent of 8th graders<sup>10</sup> tested “proficient” in math on the 2015 National Association of Education Progress (NAEP) test, also known as the “Nation’s Report Card.” Only 34 percent of 4th graders<sup>11</sup> and 36 percent of 8th graders<sup>12</sup> tested proficient in reading. These results show Oregon’s public school system is failing to educate roughly six out of 10 4th grade and 8th grade students to a proficient level in reading and mathematics. This is unacceptable, and the children of Oregon deserve better.

Oregon’s sub-standard performance on NAEP underscores the desperate need for the state to expand school choice opportunities far beyond what is currently available. Too many public

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Savings Accounts,” EdChoice, October 2013, <http://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/SCHOOLING-SATISFACTION-Arizona-Parents-Opinions-on-Using-Education-Savings-Accounts-NEW.pdf#page=6>

<sup>5</sup> Brett Kittredge, “The Special Needs ESA: What Families Enrolled in the Program are Saying After Year One,” Empower Mississippi, December 2016, <http://empowerms.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/ESA-Report-final.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Frank Newport, “Trump Family Leave, Infrastructure Proposals Widely Popular,” Gallup, April 7, 2017, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/207905/trump-family-leave-infrastructure-proposals-widely-popular.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> “2017 National School Choice Poll,” American Federation for Children, January 12, 2017, <http://www.federationforchildren.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/AFC-Beck-National-Survey-Results-1-10-17.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> “2015 Mathematics State Snapshot Report – Oregon, Grade 4,” Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/stt2015/pdf/2016009OR4.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> “2015 Mathematics State Snapshot Report – Oregon, Grade 8,” Institute for Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/stt2015/pdf/2016009OR8.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> “2015 Reading State Snapshot Report – Oregon, Grade 4,” Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/stt2015/pdf/2016008OR4.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> “2015 Reading State Snapshot Report – Oregon, Grade 8,” Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/stt2015/pdf/2016008OR8.pdf>

schools in the state are failing to adequately prepare students for productive lives. Parents should be allowed to choose the schools their children attend and should not be penalized financially if that choice is a private religious or secular school.

Currently, private school choice in the Beaver State is literally nonexistent, but, as I stated earlier, authorizing the Educational Opportunity Act would put Oregon at the forefront of the education-choice movement, making it one of the nation's leaders in education reform. Education-choice programs can give all families a greater opportunity to meet each child's unique education needs. Providing ESAs for students with special needs would be a big step forward for Oregon. When parents are given the opportunity to choose, every school must compete and improve, which gives more children the opportunity to attend a quality school.

**For more information about The Heartland Institute's work, please visit our websites at [www.heartland.org](http://www.heartland.org) and <http://news.heartland.org>. You may also call John Nothdurft, Heartland's director of government relations, at 312/377-4000 or reach him by e-mail at [john@heartland.org](mailto:john@heartland.org).**