



EDUCATION SCHOLARSHIP ACCOUNTS AND PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY

Policy Brief

Background

The expansion of student opportunity through the flexible spending of Education Scholarship Accounts (ESAs) builds in direct accountability to the parents who choose and hold the power of the purse. Families can select different schools and service providers if they are dissatisfied with how their student is faring. But ESAs can also be designed to broadly measure outcomes, including student academic achievement, while preserving provider autonomy and a healthy assortment of viable options for families. Solely using state assessments for this purpose can do more to undermine key policy goals than to ensure the desired level of accountability.

Key Context: What Other Programs Are Doing

Out of 10 states with ESA programs, only two - Indiana¹ and Tennessee -require students to take state standardized assessments as a condition of participation. The other eight states rely instead on national norm-referenced tests (NRTs) as an option to measure and report student academic progress.

Notably, Florida collects and provides aggregated reporting of achievement data from participating students to the state education department. This mirrors the state's approach for monitoring the academic progress of the 100,000-plus students who receive tax-credit scholarships. The annual evaluation of national norm-referenced test data, conducted by Florida State University, has [consistently shown](#) the performance of its entirely low-income recipients matches the average national gains for all students.

Case Against State Testing Requirements

A 2018 analysis found that a state testing requirement would make private schools [44% less likely to participate in a choice program](#). Importantly, the scope and sequence of many private schools' curricula [do not align well](#) with state standards, compelling school leaders to choose between receiving scholarship funds and preserving the design of their instructional program. As a result, scholarship students lack access to a wide range of different private schools, leaving families with fewer options.

In Louisiana, the combination of a state testing requirement and other onerous regulations - particularly a mandate to accept the voucher amount as full tuition payment along with extensive state reporting and paperwork - both narrowed and reduced the overall quality of available options. In all, nearly 70% of the state's private schools [opted not to accept](#) scholarship students. Research indicates that schools in [a state of decline - effectively lower-performing schools](#) - were more likely to accept scholarship funds. Among Louisiana schools that did opt into the program, 81% of leaders [cited](#) the state testing requirement as a major concern, 30% as a major concern.

¹ An exception among the growing number of choice programs overall, Indiana requires state tests for all its choice programs. This provision faced little resistance because most Indiana private schools already administered state assessments, largely a byproduct of a state test requirement to participate in interscholastic athletics.



Given these factors, it's not surprising that a rigorous [evaluation](#) of the state's voucher program found negative achievement results for participating students over multiple years. Negative effects were twice as high among 4th and 8th grade students taking the LEAP test, which aligned more with public school curriculum than the iLEAP test taken among students in other grades.

Mandating that all students in participating private schools take the state standardized test creates challenges for all the reasons cited above. Yet, even placing the requirement only on scholarship students can create an extra barrier for them and their families. School officials may have to administer an unfamiliar assessment or to help set up separate testing arrangements.

A More Balanced Approach

As highlighted above, some existing private choice programs require participating schools to administer nationally norm-referenced tests to scholarship students. Schools typically can choose from a state-approved menu of nationally norm-referenced tests. Florida, for example, recognizes [18 different options](#). This approach allows for greater flexibility in the range of assessments administered and aligns much better with what most private schools, including those in Utah and South Carolina, are already doing: using NRTs to monitor students' academic progress. Further, many NRTs incorporate adaptive features, better enabling educators to diagnose students' specific academic strengths and weaknesses.

[The more balanced approach](#) to accountability for private educational choice programs also includes ensuring transparent reporting of results that are easy to access, understand and align with what parents are seeking. Transparent, regularly reported aggregated results give policymakers a window into the program's success, while parents could quickly and clearly observe the progress their child is making in key academic subjects. NRTs can just as easily or more effectively provide both kinds of meaningful data.

Conclusion

A primary goal of education scholarship accounts is to give families maximum flexibility to customize their children's learning under broad, clear guidelines of state supervision. States can both honor this goal and provide additional academic accountability by offering ESA students and schools an assortment of norm-referenced testing options. Program-level results can be reported to state officials, and individual results to parents.