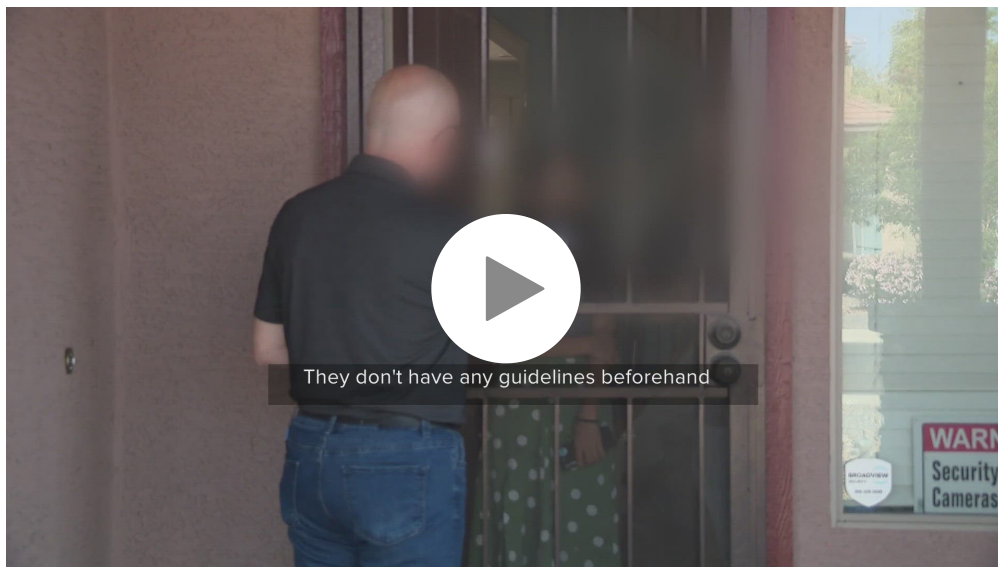


EDUCATION

## One affluent Gilbert family tried to use ESA voucher funds for a \$16,170 cello until state Schools Chief Tom Horne's office stopped it

Horne, a voucher supporter, tells 12News the best way to protect Empowerment Scholarships is to root out fraud, but far-right conservatives are gunning for his job.



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One affluent Gilbert family thought so – and fought the Department of Education to get it reimbursed.

State Schools Chief Tom Horne, a vocal supporter of Arizona's [Empowerment Scholarship Accounts](#), told the 12News I-Team that his office is cracking down on questionable ESA purchases, such as the purchase of a cello.

"We have a list of 35, but here's a few examples. A \$5,000 Rolex watch. I suspect that was probably for a parent. A \$24,000 golf simulator, probably also for a parent, believe it or not, a vasectomy testing kit," Horne said.

The Republican said the best way to protect ESAs and blunt critics of a program that has grown to cost \$1 billion a year is for the state to reject some voucher reimbursement requests, such as roughly \$64,000 for nail art and crystals.

Horne said one parent succeeded in getting more than \$14,000 in crystals reimbursed "till we caught it and put a stop to it."

Horne's move to rein in vouchers could cost him his job.

State Sen. Jake Hoffman, R-Queen Creek, leads the Legislature's Freedom Caucus and has accused Horne of being the greatest threat to Arizona's voucher program.

He's scheduled a press conference on Wednesday morning to announce a "conservative candidate" who will run against Horne in the GOP primary next year.

**RELATED:** [The 12News I-Team looked into which zip codes are receiving the most school vouchers. Here's what the data showed.](#)

Meanwhile, some parents have dug in and tried to get an administrative law judge to grant their appeals.

That's where they face Maria Syms.

The former Republican lawmaker is an attorney for the state Department of Education.

She said she's won all eight ESA appeals cases so far.

"We're alerting parents that this is not going to fly," she said. "You are not going to be able to get your golf simulator or your cello or whatever extravagant item you want."

12News examined several of those cases through a public records request.

In one case, Horne's office rejected requests from one family to use \$65,333 from ESA accounts of six children to purchase 109 laptops, computers, and tablets.

In another instance, a \$2,295 freeze dryer was denied, and Horne's office denied the use of \$1,500 in ESA money for 250 cubic feet of potting soil.

Then there's the cello.

Records show that in February 2024, a family requested \$16,170 in ESA reimbursement for a full-sized cello.

12News found the family in an upscale Gilbert neighborhood and asked why they tried to get the cello reimbursed.

The father said luxury cellos can cost a half-million dollars, and his family was only seeking reimbursement for a roughly \$16,000 cello.

He added that the less expensive cellos would “damage or destroy” his son’s musical talent, and the cello they were seeking was “kind of in the low range, actually.”

Public records obtained by 12News show the family previously had been approved to use at least \$11,000 in ESA funds for:

- A piano.
- A commercial KitchenAid mixer.
- Private fitness lessons.
- A kayak.
- Chinese calligraphy and painting lessons.

The father said the ESA handbook didn’t have any guidelines for purchases.

He said the family had already bought the cello, but then Horne’s office asked “so many questions.”

After getting nearly all their purchases paid for, the family then put their child in public school, according to Horne’s office.

The cello was rejected after Horne’s office placed a new \$4,000 limit for musical instruments.

“We look at fraudulent cases,” Syms said. “We don’t just roll over and pay them. We push back.”

Since the ESA program was expanded to all Arizona families three years ago, requests for reimbursements have skyrocketed.

There are now about 2 million requests per year for hundreds of millions of dollars.

Yet, Horne's office has just 12 employees to review them.

"We're badly understaffed," he said.

Still, records from his office show the team of 12 rejected about \$35 million in claims this school year.

That's a tenfold increase from fiscal 2022, just before universal vouchers began.

Gov. Katie Hobbs, a Democrat and outspoken critic of ESAs, said the Republican schools' chief is doing the best he can.

"I think you've seen the superintendent kind of throws up his hands over the lack of ability to administer because there's not funding to do so, and the program has grown so much."

There were about 12,000 ESA students prior to expansion, with most being disabled students.

There were nearly 87,000 students enrolled for the school year that is ending, with several thousand more expected to join, according to Horne's office.

[12News has found most of the vouchers](#) are primarily helping families in wealthy neighborhoods. Further, at least 45% of those students already were in private or home schools, according to Horne's office. That means they are now a new expense to the state budget.

Hobbs, meanwhile, has repeatedly tried to rein in the ESA program the past three years, and she's proposed an income cap limiting which families would qualify.

But the Republican-controlled Legislature has rejected any changes, and it's looking at enshrining the program by placing it in the state constitution.

Hobbs was aghast when told about the family's \$16,170 cello request.

"It is taxpayer money, and taxpayers deserve accountability. They deserve reasonable guardrails that ensure these funds are being spent on education because these are funds that are being pulled out of their local public schools," she said.

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