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Arizona Empowerment Scholarships: What \$304 million bought

AZ's universal voucher program expenses range from tuition to trampoline parks

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Arizona Empowerment Scholarships Account families are using millions of taxpayer dollars for equipment and activities that public school families would have to pay for out of pocket.



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Arizona Empowerment Scholarship Account families are using millions of taxpayer dollars for equipment and activities that public school families would have to pay for out of pocket.

The ESA program expanded a year ago to become a universal voucher system for families who choose to educate their children at home or send their children to private schools. Currently, 67,000 Arizona students receive ESA money, which varies from \$7,300 to approximately \$43,000 annually, depending on whether the child has any disabilities.

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The ABC15 Investigators spent weeks analyzing ESA data for the 2022-2023 school year, provided by the Arizona Treasury Department, which included taxpayer-funded payments to more than 14,000 vendors.

Of the \$304 million spent last school year, \$200 million, or about two-thirds of spending, went to private and religious schools for tuition and other fees. Another \$53 million was spent at businesses that sell school supplies and equipment.

Another \$50 million was spent on other things like educational activities and vendors. Some vendors in this group were uncategorized because the transaction was either very small or there was not enough data in the vendor's name.

Here is how ESA tuition money breaks down by school type:

- \$91 million – Specialty schools that focus on kids with disabilities. The largest share went to schools specializing in autism.

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ABC15 was able to categorize about \$79 million in non-school expenditures. Here is the list of the largest beneficiaries:

- \$35 million – Amazon
- \$5 million – Apple
- \$1.5 million – Barnes & Noble
- \$1.5 million – Lakeshore Learning, a school supply store.
- \$1 million – Outschool.com, an online, a-la-carte learning platform.

EDUCATIONAL EXTRAS

State law requires families to use a portion of the ESA monies for reading, grammar, math, social studies and science, but the rest can be spent on anything educational.

“We’re doing our very best to ensure that families have the greatest amount of access to all educational opportunities that are out there,” said John Ward, executive director of the ESA program for the Arizona Department of Education.

The state provides some guidance on allowable and disallowable expenses in a [handbook for parents](#). When something is not on the list, Ward said, “a family would have to submit a curriculum showing what they’re teaching and what the scope and sequence is, and they would submit that to us.”

The ESA program has 18 staff members to review and approve expenses. Most of those expenses are for private school tuition, specialized therapies for kids with disabilities, textbooks, tutors, and classroom supplies. However, ABC15 also categorized millions of dollars in expenses that could be considered

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different country every month. There were more than 400 transactions involving ESA families.

“Food is never an allowable expense on ESA, So you're telling me that there's \$50,000 being spent on this? I'm not sure what time period you're looking at,” Ward told ABC15 in September.

In a follow-up email Ward stated, “There is information included in these boxes that may make them allowable; however, we will be reviewing that information to make a final determination.”

ABC15 also asked about a trendy product to grow your own food - aeroponic indoor gardens. ESA recipients spent \$400,000 in taxpayer dollars on these tower garden systems. That's 500 transactions averaging \$900 each.

“If a parent submitted some curriculum that said tower gardens are part of that curriculum to teach some type of science concept or something else, these would be allowable,” Ward said.

See more of our interview with ESA Executive Director John Ward in the player below.

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Among the \$2 million in music expenses, ABC15 found some people buying pianos for their homes. One transaction was for nearly \$4,000.

“These are absolutely allowable,” Ward said. “Now, if it was a luxury piano, some type of grand piano, baby grand, we may not approve that as a luxury item.”

ABC15 also found a Valley company that advertises the option to learn how to drive in a luxury car, like a BMW or Tesla. The ESA program paid for 77 transactions for the driving lessons, averaging \$835 each.

“The ESA program is not going to regulate where parents should seek services for their children, including driving schools,” Ward said. “While you may think this may not be a good use of that family's ESA funding, at the end of the day, they get a fixed amount of money, and if that's how they're going to choose to

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- \$3,400 spent on a single transaction at a golf store.
- A \$10,000 expense at a sewing machine company
- Appliances that freeze dry food. Average cost? \$3,000 each. (According to the ESA program, this is no longer an allowable expense)
- More than 100 passes to Arizona Snowbowl ski resort
- \$350,000 for ninja warrior training centers, trampoline parks, and climbing gyms.
- \$1.2 million spent on martial arts instruction.

“The vast majority of purchases that are coming through are completely allowable,” Ward said.

PARENTS: ESAs PROMOTE EQUITY

Leila Woodard created a classroom in her home for her 7-year-old son, Rowan, and four friends. She calls the arrangement a homeschool pod.

“Not all children fit within the box of public education,” Woodard said. “He had been kicked out of a couple of schools; they couldn't accommodate his needs.”

Rowan has autism and other disabilities. Now his mom devises his lesson plans, and she says she spends most of his ESA money on tutors and classroom supplies.

For her, an ESA creates equity. She believes individualizing instruction and the learning environment gives her child the best opportunity to learn.

“I think we're seeing a lot of people very happy with the program and how it's helping their children.” said Woodard.

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“The families that I've talked to are all using it correctly, in my opinion, and doing amazing things,” Woodard said.

CRITICS: ESAs CREATE TWO-TIER SYSTEM

Critics of ESAs question whether the vouchers are truly accessible to typical public-school families, who have limited time and resources.

“I, as a working mom, cannot drive my kids around to swimming practice in the morning, and horseback riding in the afternoon, and then teach them some math, and then bring them to a tutoring center to do some writing,” said Beth Lewis with Save Our Schools Arizona.

Lewis campaigned against expanding the ESA program to include all kids, instead promoting reinvesting in public schools.

ABC15's data analysis provided the first, public look at aggregate ESA purchases. Lewis said the transactions show inequalities in the system.

“It shows what a two-tiered system this is for haves and have-nots, right?” Lewis said. “The public-school kids have no resources and are really, really struggling, and then these families can use vouchers to pay for jiu-jitsu while the rest of us pay out of pocket.”

Lewis said taxpayers and voters will have buyer's remorse.

“They do not want to pay for a piano in everybody's living room when they can pay for a piano in a local high school that serves 400 kids a year for 20 years,” Lewis said.

ESA administrators said they want to run the program as efficiently as

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When asked if there needs to be a reassessment of whether ESAs are working for the betterment and education of our kids, Ward replied, “That's a policy question that the legislature and governor will answer.”

ABC15 reached out to the luxury car driving school and the store that sold the most expensive piano on our list. Both companies emphasized how the expenses are state-approved, that their customers had multiple price points to choose from, and their products and services provide valuable educational experiences.

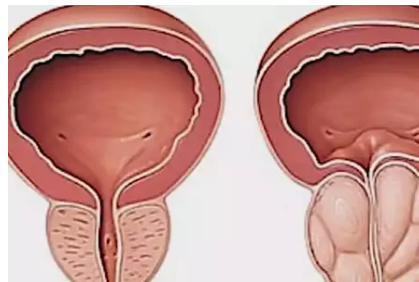
Contact ABC15 Investigator Melissa Blasius at Melissa.Blasius@abc15.com or 602-685-6362.

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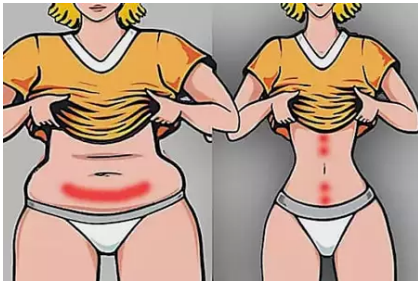
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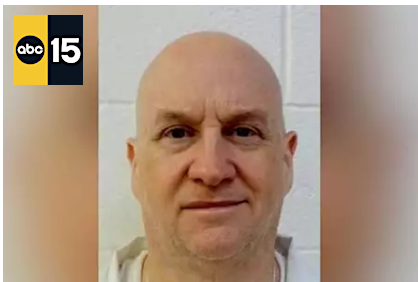
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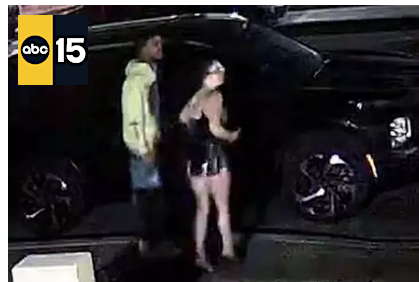
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