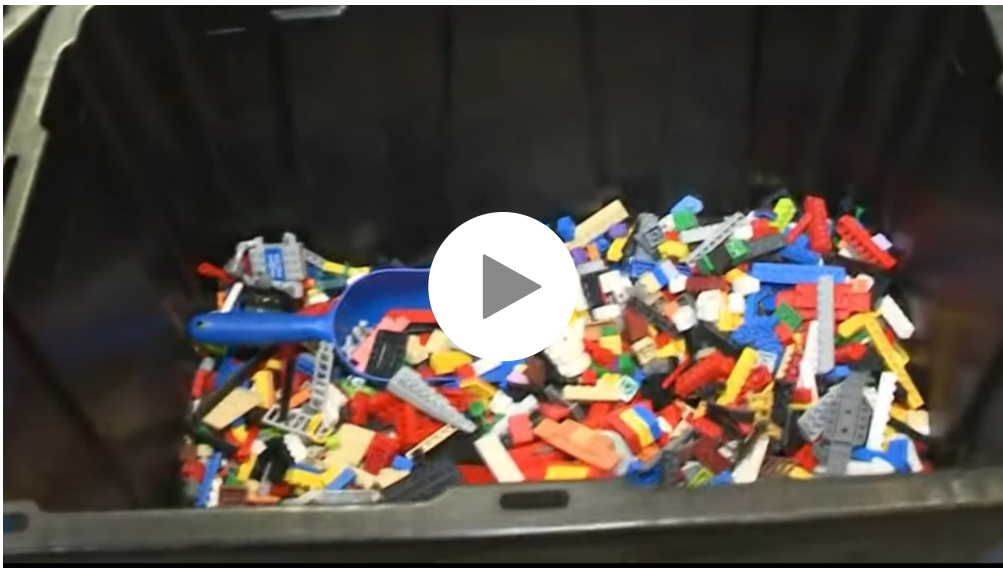


EDUCATION

Parents of private voucher students spent over \$1 million of public money buying Lego sets

The brick sets are an allowable purchase under the state's ESA program. But the volume and the type of sets are controversial.



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Published: 4:05 PM PDT June 7, 2024
Updated: 4:50 PM PDT June 7, 2024



PHOENIX — Legos, the brick toy that kids love and parents step on and grimace, are causing some winning in Arizona's school voucher debate.

The voucher program, known as ESA for Empowerment Scholarship Accounts, has been



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An advocacy group obtained data from the state treasury department showing that during a nine-month span:

- Arizona taxpayers paid for at least \$1 million of Legos for private education
- The money paid for 20,000 sets at an estimated average cost of \$40-\$50
- 2,800 sets cost more than \$100
- 84 sets purchased cost more than \$500

The data represents only part of the spending on Legos during that timespan; the record keeping is not comprehensive.

"Using manipulatives like Legos to teach math concepts and geometry is valid," said Senate Education Chair Ken Bennet, R-Prescott. "Spending \$500, \$800 or \$1,000 for sets is a bit head-scratching."

Legos are allowable purchases within the voucher program. The brick toys came to the forefront of the voucher debate late last year, when Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Horne feuded with the leader of the activist group Save Our Schools, Beth Lewis.

Lewis claimed a \$500 Lego set purchase exemplified frivolous voucher spending.

Horne said any suggestion that a parent was being reimbursed by the voucher program for a "\$500 Lego set" was a lie. Horne used Department of Education letterhead [to issue a November 28th news release to accuse SOS of "a pattern of lying"](#) about the voucher program and said the alleged Lego purchase was false.

"No ESA parent has been reimbursed \$500 to buy Legos," Horne said in the statement.

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However, financial records released this month by the state treasurer show that, in fact, parents have used scholarship funds to purchase at least 84 Lego sets at a price tag of \$500 or more. They used a separate spending platform not related to the reimbursement process. The total bill for a nine-month span? About \$1 million.

Purchases included an \$1,800 Star Destroyer

Last week, the state education department released 522 pages of Lego transaction records in response to a December 2023 records request from Save Our Schools. The transactions were made between April 2023 and January 2024 and were processed on Amazon through the voucher program's third-party spending platform, Class Wallet.

The database is only a partial snapshot of all program Lego purchases over the 9-month time span. Parents can also buy products with their own money and seek reimbursement from the state education department.

Horne's office confirms to 12News they don't categorize those ESA reimbursements in a way that would allow them to provide records reflecting those Lego expenses during the same time period.

"Knowing an overall statewide amount might be interesting," said ADE spokesperson Doug Nick. "But it would not impact our request process. Even a large amount could have an underlying justification that conforms to current law."

According to Save Our Schools, the Class Wallet Amazon database shows there were about 26,000 total LEGO transactions. Close to 20,000 were labeled as "completed" and roughly 2,500 were labeled as "canceled" or "rejected," the rest were not labeled.

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Among high-end Lego purchases:

- an \$1,800 Limited Edition Star Wars Super Star Destroyer
- a \$905 Titanic set
- a \$900 Harry Potter castle

One parent purchased 39 Lego sets in one transaction totaling \$4,200.

For the advocacy group, the purchases represent a snapshot of a poorly regulated program.

"Clearly Mr. Horne either doesn't know what's happening in the program he oversees or he was lying," Lewis said, referring to Horne's November news release.

The fight to 'Lego' the tax dollars

Arizonans have more than 75,000 ESA voucher accounts authorizing them to spend an average of \$9,800 for the private school tuition or homeschooling needs of their child. If they don't spend the entire amount, the money rolls over to the next year and the excess can be spent for college.

A spokesperson for Horne did not answer questions directly about the high-end Lego purchases and instead issued a statement in writing saying in part, "Legos are a legitimate educational tool and are found in hundreds of elementary classrooms all over the state. It's not different for the ESA program."

"This is another coldhearted ideological stunt to attack parents' rights to choose what's best for their children," Nick said.

ESA opponents argue the two funding systems are not comparable.

"It's one thing to spend taxpayer dollars on a piano that serves hundreds of kids over many years in a school. It's another thing to buy a piano for one family's living room," Lewis said.

Critics are also concerned parents give the Legos as gifts or resell them on the secondary market.

'Find ways to stop a few abuses'

As more revelations surface regarding the program, Governor Katie Hobbs is demanding tighter restrictions during state budget negotiations. Legislative leaders have a July 1st deadline and face a deficit next year of more than \$1 billion. Universal vouchers are projected to add a \$429 million net cost to the state budget next year, [according to the Grand Canyon Institute](#). Republican Leaders Ben Toma of Peoria and Warren Petersen of Gilbert have said they oppose significant reforms.

Toma and Petersen did not respond to 12News requests for comment.

Bennet reviewed the findings and said that he spoke to Horne's office about the Lego purchases and was told legislative action would be required to change policies.

"The high-dollar sets do stand out and point out, in my mind, we need to find ways to stop a few abuses," Bennet said.

He stopped short of saying he would call for legislative action to curtail such expenses.

RELATED: [Arizona's ESA payment policy is changing: What you need to know](#)

School voucher advocates at the nonprofit Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom say simply adding up dollar amounts for Lego purchases does not tell the full story.

"There's a lot of studies showing how educational Legos are," said policy analyst Colleen Hroncich. "I look at what schools do with football stadiums and I say 'sure, sports are educational, but is a multi-million-dollar football stadium necessary?' I think it's the same sort of thing where different people have different priorities."

As the first state to make school vouchers available to all parents regardless of income status two years ago, Arizona remains in the spotlight for what is largely an experiment in education. Voucher advocates are determined to hold the line to ensure "the money follows the student" with as much flexibility for parents as possible.

"There are already restrictions for what it can be used for. Things that aren't educational do get rejected and if you make it more bureaucratic you really just lose the benefits of it," Hroncich

said.

Arizona remains at the bottom nationally in per-pupil funding. Vouchers for non-special needs students are awarded at 90% of the state's charter school per-pupil funding formula (which is higher than the district amount). According to the state's nonpartisan budget committee [and a 12News analysis](#), ESA vouchers add a cost to the state budget in nearly all circumstances.

"We have schools going without paper, markers. Why are we funneling money to kayaks and pianos and Legos?" Lewis said.

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