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The Succeed Scholarship Program: A Voucher for Arkansas' Students in Special Education

Sarah C. McKenzie

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

Gary W. Ritter

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

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The Succeed Scholarship Program: *A Voucher for Arkansas’ Students in Special Education*

The 2016-17 school year is the first year that Arkansas’ students with disabilities could use state education dollars as tuition at authorized private schools. In this brief we examine the Succeed Scholarship Program and consider the impacts for Arkansas schools and students.

Introduction

In 2015, Arkansas passed [House Bill 1552](#) to create the Succeed Scholarship Program that permits public school students with disabilities to transfer to an approved private school of their parent’s choosing with the support of the student’s full foundation funding to cover school tuition and fees. Students with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) can apply to participating private schools, and if accepted, receive a voucher worth the state’s foundation funding amount (currently \$6,646) or school tuition, whichever is less. Approved private schools are held to academic, fiscal, non-discrimination, and safety standards.

Arkansas is one of 10 states that provides private school tuition vouchers specifically for students with disabilities. Along with charter schools, virtual schools, and homeschooling, vouchers offer students with disabilities the chance to enroll in schools that best meet their individual needs.¹

This Brief

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Succeed Scholarship Program

The Succeed Scholarship enables students in special education to attend private schools. As this is a new program, key aspects of the program are highlighted below.

Who is eligible for a Scholarship?

To be eligible for a Succeed Scholarship, students must have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), be enrolled in a public school, and have attended a public school for at least one full academic year. The public school enrollment requirement is waived for children of active duty members of the military.

How do students get a Scholarship?

The student must be accepted to attend a private school that is eligible to participate in the program. Parents can then apply for a Scholarship. Parents must inform the student’s assigned public school 60 days before they receive their first scholarship payment.

How much is the Scholarship worth?

The Scholarship is either the state foundation formula amount (currently \$6,646) or the private school tuition, whichever is less.

For more information about the Succeed Scholarship Program visit:
[Arkansas Department of Education](#)
[The Reform Alliance](#)
[EdChoice](#)

- Public school students with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) can receive a scholarship to attend a participating private school.
- Scholarship students must take a norm-referenced test every year unless their IEP says otherwise.
- Currently, 17 accredited private schools are participating and all are faith-based or religiously affiliated.
- Participating private schools cannot discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, must be financially stable, and meet health and safety requirements.
- All rights and services under the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act are relinquished once in the program.
- Monitoring of the program should be focused on fiscal impacts to the state and the use of the program for all types of disabilities and severities.

Which schools can participate in the program?

Private schools must submit an application to participate in the program. They must be accredited by the State Board of Education, the Arkansas Nonpublic School Accrediting Association, or another accrediting association recognized by the State Board of Education as providing services to severely disabled individuals.² Private schools must show they are fiscally sound, comply with the anti-discrimination code under the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and meet health and safety requirements. Schools must be accountable to parents for the educational needs of students, employ teachers with a bachelor’s degree or higher, and follow their disciplinary handbook before expelling a scholarship student.

Participating private schools can have a religious affiliation. The Supreme Court ruling in *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* (2002) determined that parents could utilize public funds to educate their children without advancing or inhibiting religion.³ Over 80% of the private schools in Arkansas are religiously affiliated. All of the schools currently participating in the Succeed Scholarship Program are faith-based or affiliated with a religion.

Do private schools test their students?

While private schools are not required to administer annual assessments but are required to give Scholarship students a nationally recognized norm-referenced test annually. Parents can exempt students from taking this test in the student’s IEP. If exempt, the school must create a portfolio that shows a student’s progress for the year.

What happens to a student’s IEP when he/she enrolls in a private school?

When applying for the Succeed Scholarship Program, parents must sign a waiver that releases the state from any legal obligation for the provision of services or education of a student. The state only has to provide the funding for the scholarship once this waiver is signed. A student’s private school may choose to use the IEP from his or her previous school, but they are not required to by law.

What if the private school tuition is greater than the scholarship amount?

The Succeed Scholarship Program allows parents to supplement the cost of tuition above the scholarship amount with their own money if they choose. Similarly, parents can use their own money to pay for additional programs or services offered at the school that are not included in tuition.

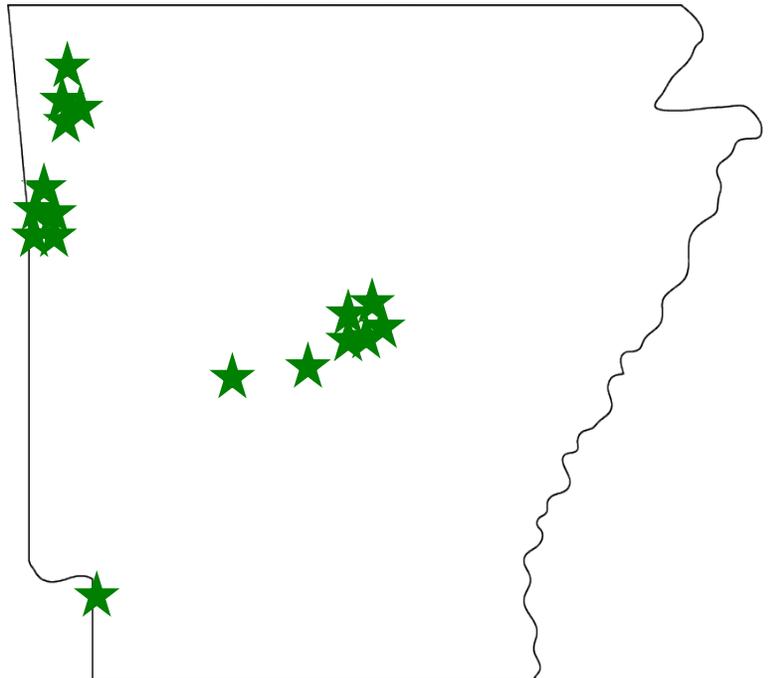
What if parents decide they are not happy with the private school?

Parents can remove their student from the private school at any time. Students can transfer to another participating school or enroll in a public school. Scholarship funds are paid monthly by the state to the private school and are conditional on scholarship student enrollment.

Private Schools Participating in the Succeed Scholarship Program (2016-17)

City	School
Bryant	Arkansas Christian Academy
Fayetteville	Prism Education Center
	St. Joseph Catholic School
	Fayetteville Christian School
Fort Smith	Christ the King School
	St. Boniface Catholic School
	Immaculate Conception School
	Trinity Catholic Junior High School
Hot Springs	Union Christian Academy
	St. John’s Catholic School
Little Rock	Christ Lutheran School
	Our Lady of the Holy Souls
	St. Edward Catholic School
North Little Rock	St. Theresa Catholic School
	Immaculate Conception School
Springdale	Shiloh Christian School
Texarkana	Trinity Christian School

Figure 1: Locations of participating private schools



Impact on students

Theory may suggest that allowing parents to choose the school that is the best fit for their student will have positive impacts for kids, but there is very little research on outcomes for students with disabilities in private school choice programs. As can be seen in Table 1, there are ten states with voucher program for students with special needs. In addition to these states, Arizona and South Carolina have programs where parents can receive tax credits for the private school tuition of their special needs student.

Few voucher programs for students with disabilities require testing. Standardized testing is not typically done in private schools, and the requirement of accountability testing in choice programs may reduce the desire of schools to participate. Furthermore, test results may not be the most appropriate outcome measure for students with disabilities, as in high school graduation rates or post-high school employment may be more relevant measures of success. For these reasons, no research currently exists on impact of private school choice programs on the academic achievement of students with disabilities.

What we do know about impacts of special education vouchers comes from the oldest and largest program, Florida's John M. McKay Scholarship for Students with Disabilities. One study analyzed how satisfied parents were with their private schools students attended with this voucher. Parents reported high satisfaction overall as well as with special education services specifically. Parents also reported less bullying and smaller class sizes.⁴ This research, however, only compared the satisfaction of parents of students who were currently in the program to those who left the program. Parents that left the program would likely be less satisfied than those who stayed, and the findings should be interpreted with caution.

Another study examined the effects of the Florida voucher on public schools in their vicinity. Researchers found that the existence of the voucher slightly reduced the likelihood that public schools identified students as having a learning disability, and resulted in positive academic gains for students remaining in the public schools.⁵

These findings are important to weigh against concerns that voucher critics voice about the public students who are left behind being negatively impacted as a result of reduced financial resources. Nevertheless, we do not know much about the experience of students with disabilities who attend private school through a voucher program.

Table 1. Programs using vouchers to support private school tuition for students with disabilities.

State	Program Name	Year Enacted
Florida	John M. McKay Scholarship for Students with Disabilities Program	1999
Ohio	Autism Scholarship Program	2003
Utah	Carson Smith Special Needs Scholarship	2005
Georgia	Special Needs Scholarship Program	2007
Louisiana	School Choice Program for Certain Students with Exceptionalities	2010
Oklahoma	Lindsey Nicole Henry Scholarship for Students with Disabilities Program	2010
Ohio	Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship Program	2011
Mississippi	Dyslexia Therapy Scholarship for Students with Dyslexia Program	2012
Mississippi	Nate Rogers Scholarship for Students with Disabilities Program	2013
North Carolina	Special Education Scholarship Grants for Children with Disabilities	2014
Arkansas	Succeed Scholarship Program	2015
Mississippi	Equal Opportunity for Students with Special Needs Act	2015
Wisconsin	Special Education Scholarship Program	2015

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Office for Education Policy
211 Grad Ed Building
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Phone: (479) 575-3773
Fax: (479) 575-3196
oep@uark.edu

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FACULTY DIRECTOR :

Gary W. Ritter, Ph.D.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR:

Sarah McKenzie, Ph.D.

RESEARCH STAFF:

Leesa Foreman

Charlene A. Reid

Evan Rhinesmith

Elise Swanson

Sivan Tuchman



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What does this mean for Arkansas?

In it's first year, the Succeed Scholarship Program is small with 17 private schools participating in the program and only 20 students receiving scholarships in Fall 2016. The program can, however, serve all special education students in the state who are enrolled in a public school or are the dependent of military personnel on active duty, which would be approximately 120,000 students. Neighboring states Mississippi, Louisiana, and Oklahoma, however, have had similar special education vouchers in place for several years but the programs are still small, enrolling fewer than 400 students statewide.⁶ Arkansas' Succeed Scholarship Program could expand more quickly, however, because the law and its administration is not overly burdensome to parents or private schools.

Funding

The funding for the Succeed Scholarship Program does not come out of the Public School Fund, and does not take any money from what is currently given to schools in the state. If the program were to grow substantially, it is possible that funds may be allocated from the Public School Fund. The scholarships can only be in the amount of the state foundation funding amount or less, which could lead to savings for the state and districts due to the high cost of educating students with disabilities.⁷

Student Support

Some special education advocates fear that students with disabilities will not receive necessary supports and services once enrolled in private schools. Voucher and school choice proponents, however, argue that parents and students are free to choose the school that will provide the supports they desire rather than relying on the IEP.

Measuring Success

The Succeed Scholarship Program will be successful if Arkansas' special needs students and their parents feel that their students' needs are being met. Enrollment in the program should be closely monitored over the next few years to ensure that students with various types and levels of severity of disability are served through the Scholarship. Quality parent information sources that are accessible to individuals of any background are important to ensure all parents throughout the state are aware of this option for their students. Substantial growth in the program may signal high demand for this school choice option, and perhaps discussion of similar options for students living in poverty.

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