



# THE ESA OPPORTUNITY MAP

Charting Empowerment Scholarship  
Account Eligibility for Students in Failing  
Arizona Public Schools

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# INTRODUCTION

Too many Arizona public schools are failing to deliver a quality education. In 2019, the most recent year in which the State Board of Education assigned letter grades, more than 180 of Arizona's 2,200 Arizona public schools received a rating of D or F. This translates to more than 85,000 students enrolled in failing or severely underperforming public schools.<sup>1</sup>

Many observers believe there's a simple solution to this problem: increase spending to properly provide for the needs of these students. Yet over the past five decades, America's K-12 per-pupil spending has nearly tripled (adjusted for inflation), even as the achievement gap facing disadvantaged and minority students has remained as wide as ever.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, despite ballooning expenditures, student outcomes across the nation have stayed virtually flat.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, although many states have adopted and expanded school choice programs in recent years, too many students throughout the country continue to find their educational opportunities dictated largely by the neighborhood in which their families can afford to live.

Fortunately, states like Arizona have taken enormous strides to decouple students' educational opportunity from what should be unrelated factors such as their ZIP codes, seeking to instead ensure that a child's access to quality schooling does not depend on their family's ability to afford to live within the boundaries of a wealthy or high-performing school district.

In addition to public school choice programs such as charter schools and district open enrollment policies, Arizona's Empowerment Scholarship Account (ESA) program stands among the most significant tools available to ensure that families' opportunities are not limited by the offerings of their nearby school system.

Known more commonly as education savings accounts, ESAs allow families to receive a portion of the dollars that would have been spent on their children's education in a public school, and instead use that money to pay for tuition, tutors, homeschooling, special needs therapies, and a variety of other teaching tools that best meet their children's needs.

While the ESA program has grown exponentially since its inception—from just over 100 students in 2011-2012 to roughly 10,000 now—there remains an even larger pool of eligible students who potentially stand to benefit from the program in the years ahead. Yet many of these students' families lack awareness of the program, are uncertain about whether their children qualify, or underestimate the ability of ESAs to help them fully cover the costs of private education.

Now, however, a new EdChoice-Goldwater Institute resource, the Arizona ESA Mapping Tool, will equip these families with the information they need to access the program and ensure their students receive an education that meets their individual learning needs.

The following pages highlight some of the features and findings of this powerful new online resource and the opportunities for students opting out of D- and F-rated public schools via the ESA program.



# UNDERSTANDING ESA ELIGIBILITY: STUDENTS FROM FAILING SCHOOLS

Among the categories of children eligible for an Arizona ESA are students attending failing public schools. Specifically, Arizona statute provides that ESA eligible students include a child who is **“attending a school or school district ... assigned a letter grade of D or F”** or who is **“currently eligible to attend kindergarten and resides within the attendance boundary of a school ... assigned a letter grade of D or F.”**<sup>4</sup>

This means that ESAs can provide students a lifeline from failing schools in two ways. First, for children who are already attending a failing school in kindergarten through 12th grade, the program provides the opportunity to transfer to a better educational environment elsewhere—whether to a private school, a homeschooling arrangement, or otherwise. Second, and equally importantly, this provision also means that children who would normally be tracked into failing public schools by ZIP code can avoid the prospects of such an environment altogether, instead entering the ESA program directly as a kindergartener.



# FEATURES OF THE ARIZONA ESA MAPPING TOOL

These eligibility provisions appear straightforward at first glance, but many families lack the critical information they need to evaluate whether they satisfy these criteria, and whether ESA-funded alternatives to a failing public school might exist in their area. In particular, few families know the specific geographic areas covered by a school's attendance boundaries, a problem compounded by the fact that elementary, middle, and high school attendance boundaries overlap but often differ. In addition, even for families who know the public schools to which they are zoned—or have a student already attending one—they may be unaware of the school's assigned letter grades so they do not know whether they are eligible for an ESA.

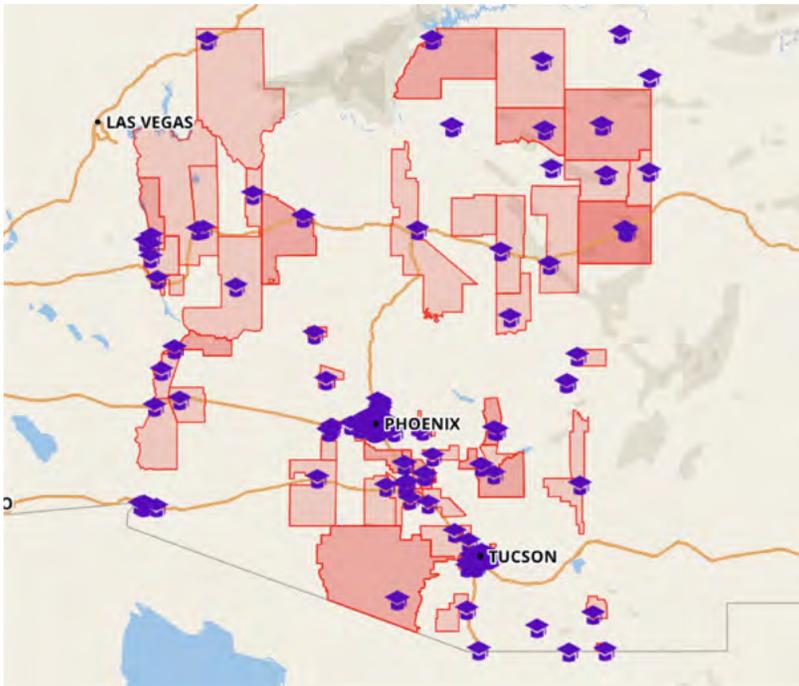
To address these knowledge gaps, the Arizona ESA Mapping Tool offers families a powerful, user-friendly resource. Specifically, the tool provides each of the following:

- the location of each Arizona public school that is rated D or F
- attendance boundaries of each Arizona public school rated D or F<sup>5</sup>
- the location of private schools, identified (where available) by grade range served, and tuition and fee rates by grade range.

The tool provides this information in both statewide and neighborhood-level scrollable detail. Figure 1, for example, displays a snapshot of the distribution of D- and F-rated public schools and the corresponding geographic coverage of their attendance boundaries across the state of Arizona, as captured by the tool. As illustrated in the statewide view, failing public schools are most densely clustered in the Phoenix and Tucson metropolitan areas (as are Arizona public schools more generally), but students in both urban and rural areas throughout the state find themselves enrolled in D- and F-rated public schools or living within their boundaries.

**Figure 1**

Arizona D/F-Rated Public Schools and Their Attendance Boundaries

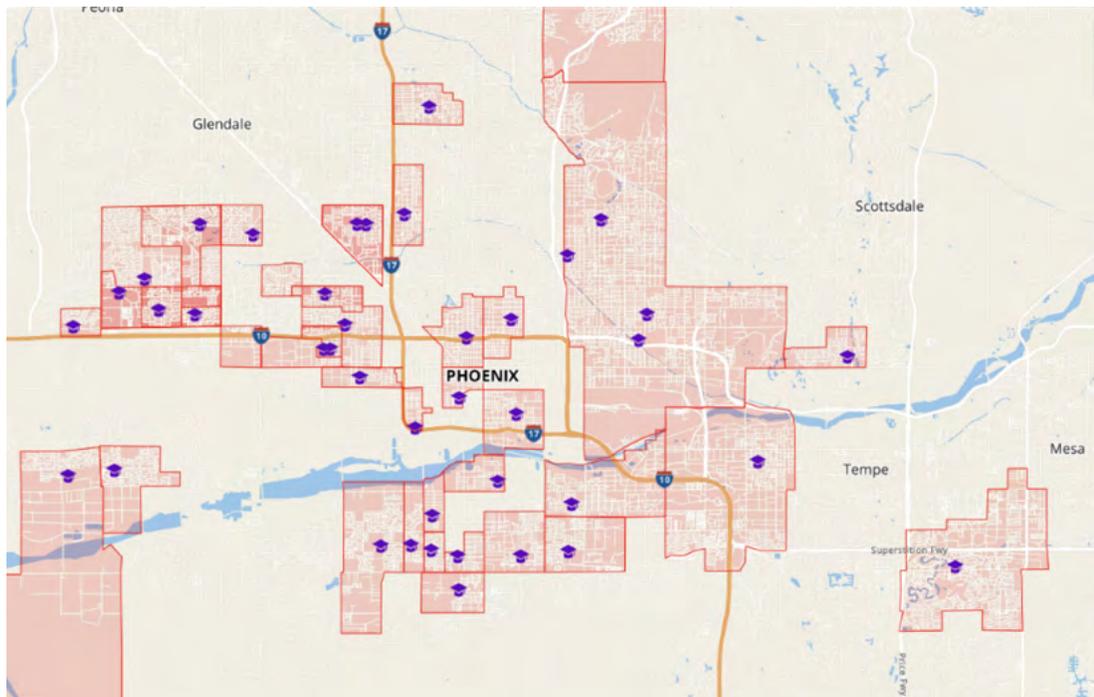


*Source: Based on 2019 A-F letter grade data as reported by the Arizona State Board of Education and attendance boundary coordinates as compiled by the U.S. Department of Education School Attendance Boundary Survey.*

The Arizona ESA Mapping Tool also reveals a more detailed landscape of D- and F-rated schools and attendance boundaries within specific regions of the state. As shown in Figure 2, for example, the Phoenix metropolitan area includes a significant number of failing schools, whose attendance boundaries encompass an extensive geographic area. Fortunately, for students attending or zoned for one of these many schools, the ESA program offers the opportunity for an improved education elsewhere.

## Figure 2

Phoenix Area D/F-Rated Public Schools and Their Attendance Boundaries



*Source: Based on 2019 A-F letter grade data as reported by the Arizona State Board of Education and attendance boundary coordinates as compiled by the U.S. Department of Education School Attendance Boundary Survey.*

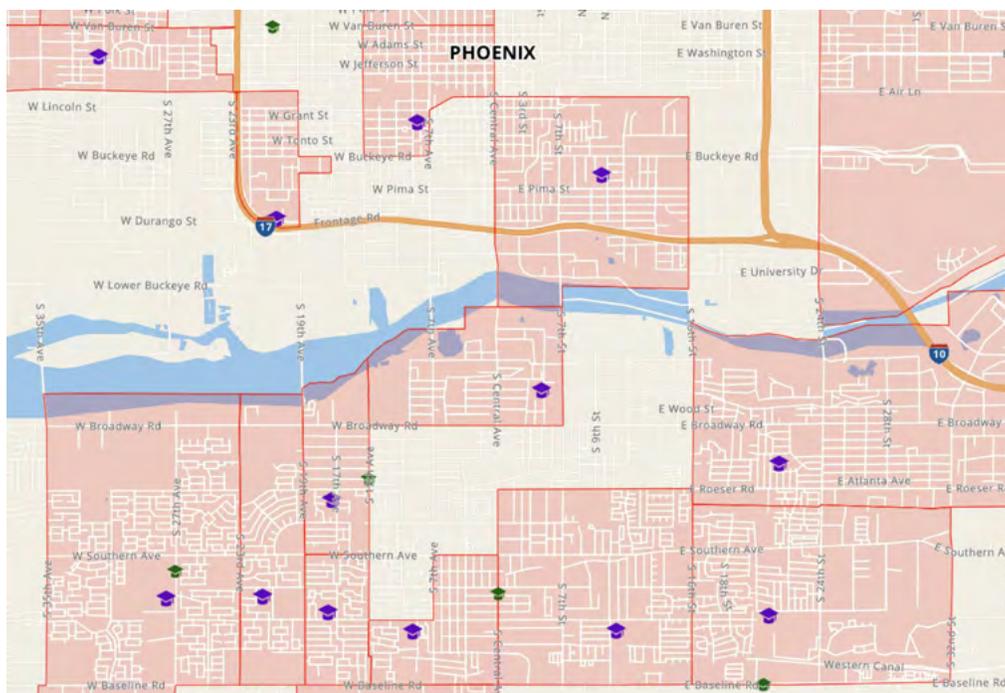
In addition to displaying the metropolitan area at large, the Arizona ESA Mapping Tool provides even greater detail at the individual neighborhood level. As seen in Figure 3, for instance, the tool provides a more magnified look at specific parts of Phoenix—in this case, the area south of downtown Phoenix, which is largely encompassed by the Roosevelt Elementary School District. As evident from the image, this district includes an exceptionally high concentration of D- and F-rated schools, resulting in a contiguous series of school attendance boundaries in which families could enjoy automatic ESA eligibility.

As seen also in the same image, the Arizona ESA Mapping Tool provides a snapshot of not only the public schools, but also allows for the display of nearby private schools. As shown, even within this one area of the city, in which the majority of neighborhoods fall within a failing school's attendance boundary and thus enjoy automatic ESA eligibility, several private schools (marked in green) offer students a nearby alternative.

Importantly, this level of detail allows families to have more than a rough idea of where they might qualify for an ESA. By revealing the attendance boundaries of the D or F schools in these neighborhoods, families can identify their specific streets to discern whether their children would qualify under the D- and F-eligibility provision.

### Figure 3

South Phoenix Area D/F-Rated Public School Attendance Boundaries, with Public & Private School Locations



*Source: Based on 2019 A-F letter grade data as reported by the Arizona State Board of Education, attendance boundary coordinates as compiled by the U.S. Department of Education School Attendance Boundary Survey and private schools independently identified as serving students in grades K-12 in Arizona or included in the Private School Universe Survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics within the U.S. Department of Education.*

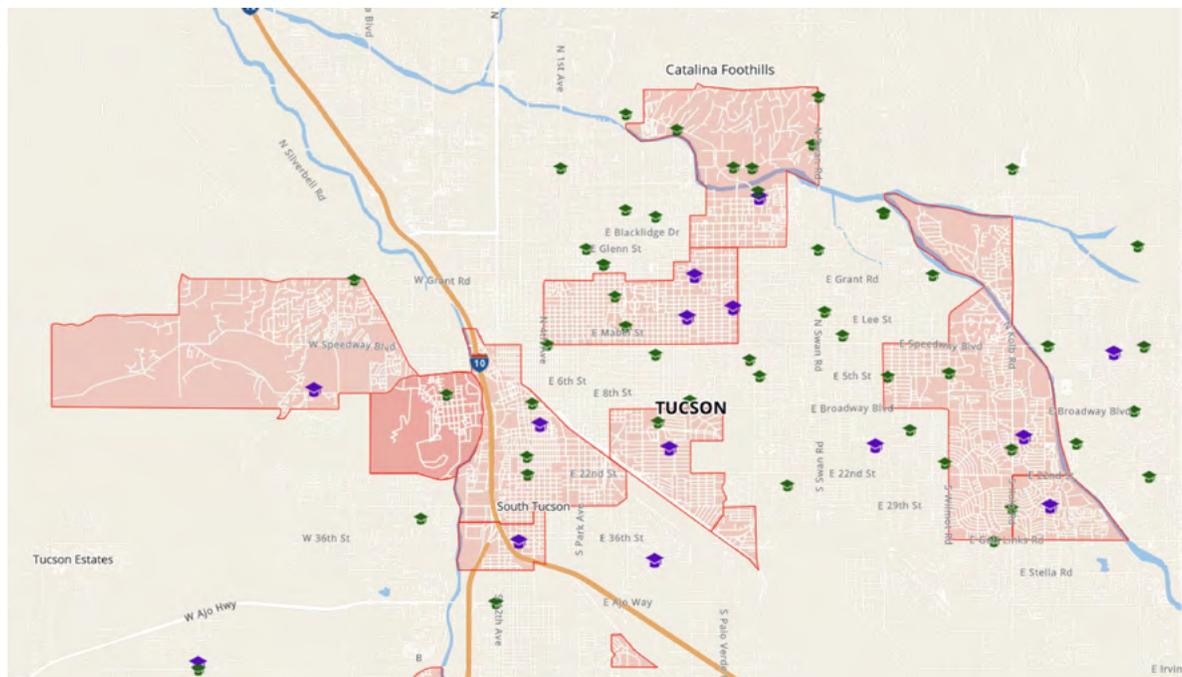


Of course, far from providing detailed information only for the Phoenix area, the Arizona ESA Mapping Tool provides the same level of detail for other urban and rural areas throughout the state. Figure 4, for example, displays attendance boundaries for D- and F-rated public elementary schools in the Tucson area, overlaid with the locations of private schools.

Even looking only at the attendance boundaries of D- and F-rated elementary schools in the Tucson region—it is clear that a worrying share of public school students would immediately face an underperforming schooling environment in their early grades. Unfortunately, the share of students facing D- or F-rated public schools increases even more once accounting for the students who will be tracked into a D- or F-rated public school later in their career based on the attendance boundaries of the public middle and high schools in which they live.

Fortunately, as is clear from Figure 4, students in neighborhoods across the Tucson area have access to a high number of nearby private schooling options.

**Figure 4**  
Tucson Area D/F-Rated Elementary School Attendance Boundaries with Public & Private School Locations



*Source: Based on 2019 A-F letter grade data as reported by the Arizona State Board of Education, attendance boundary coordinates as compiled by the U.S. Department of Education School Attendance Boundary Survey and private schools independently identified as serving students in grades K-12 in Arizona or included in the Private School Universe Survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics within the U.S. Department of Education.*





# IDENTIFYING PRIVATE OPTIONS

Lastly, in addition to identifying the school locations and attendance boundaries, the interactive Arizona ESA Mapping Tool also identifies site-level detail on private school options, including grade levels, tuition and fee amounts, and contact information from the 2020-2021 school year.

Importantly, while this resource helps identify the ESA eligibility of students from failing public schools and the availability of private school options awaiting them, there remain other major avenues of nonpublic education that ESA students can pursue that are not included in the tool. Specifically, arrangements such as homeschooling co-ops, “learning pods,” and “microschools” are increasingly helping to fill the needs of students outside either the public or traditional private school spheres. Thanks to the ESA program’s funding flexibility, families pursuing such options are fully empowered to pursue a high-quality education even where they may lack access to an established private school.



# OPPORTUNITIES AHEAD

In 2021, Arizona lawmakers passed new legislation strengthening the ESA program and supporting students' access to it. Among its other major provisions, this new legislation dramatically reduced the waiting time for prospective families to join the ESA program, reducing the amount of time most students are required to spend in a public school from the first 100 days of the year prior to joining the ESA program to any 45 days of the current or prior year.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, in the same way that the ESA program previously allowed students from military parents to join the ESA program without first logging an arbitrary number of days in a public school setting, students who meet the eligibility criteria of the D- and F-rated public school provisions and who qualify as “low-income” will also now be empowered to pursue an ESA without any further delay. (For purposes of the program, low-income is defined as meeting the income eligibility requirements of the National Free and Reduced Price Lunch program—roughly \$48,500 for a family of four as of 2021.<sup>7</sup>)

As a result of these changes, ESA eligible families from failing public schools will no longer be required to languish unnecessarily in learning environments that do not meet their needs. With the help of this mapping tool, these families can embark on a new, more hopeful chapter for their students as soon as they are ready.

**To access the interactive Arizona ESA Mapping Tool, please visit [goldwaterinstitute.org/ESA](https://goldwaterinstitute.org/ESA).**

# WORKS CITED

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2. Table 236.55. Total and current expenditures per pupil in public elementary and secondary schools: Selected years, 1919-20 through 2016-17, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19\\_236.55.asp?current=yes](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_236.55.asp?current=yes); Eric Hanushek, Paul Peterson, et al, *The Achievement Gap Fails to Close*, Education Next, Volume 19, etc. etc. <https://www.educationnext.org/achievement-gap-fails-close-half-century-testing-shows-persistent-divide/>.
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7. Child Nutrition Programs Income Eligibility Guidelines (2020-2021), U.S. Department of Agriculture, March 20, 2020, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/fr-032020>.