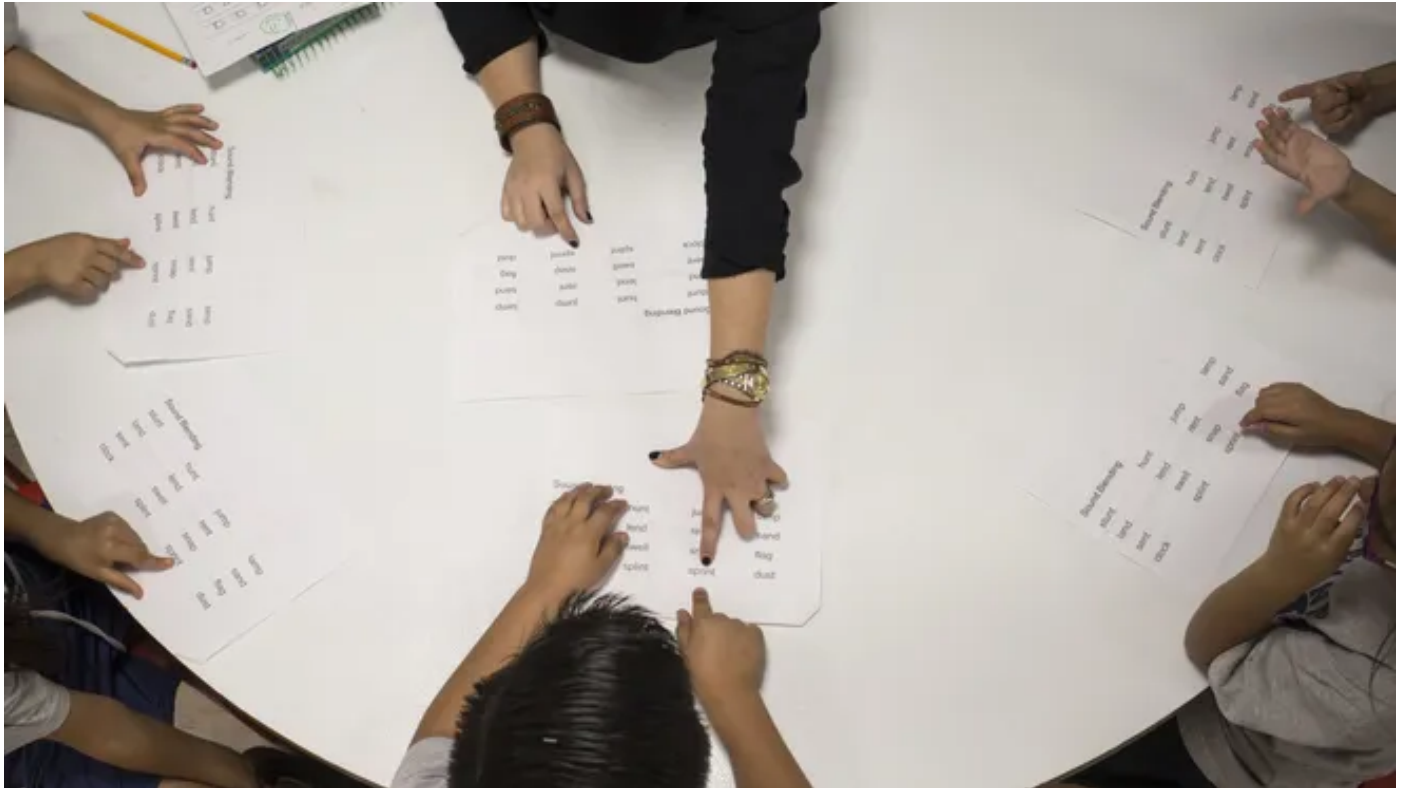


Arizona school-choice backers promote vouchers to undocumented immigrants



A group promoting school choice in Arizona is marketing the state's controversial voucher program to Spanish-speaking parents by telling them immigration status isn't a barrier to receiving public money to attend private school.

American Federation for Children's [online Spanish-language pitch](#) states: "Arizona has a state-funded program that pays for private schools for thousands of children who live in this state. They don't verify income or immigration status. Children don't need to have or maintain certain grades."

Empowerment Scholarship Accounts, which give public money that would otherwise go to local public schools to parents to use for private school and

other educational services, have been strongly supported by the Arizona Legislature's Republican majority.

Many of those same lawmakers have also opposed illegal immigration and in-state college tuition for undocumented immigrants, including "dreamers" — the young immigrants brought to the United States illegally as children.

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Kim Martinez, Arizona communications director for American Federation for Children, said immigration status isn't a factor when applying for an ESA.

"We care about giving children access to the K-12 education of their family's choice, in full compliance with the law. We don't take positions on tangential immigration issues," Martinez said in a statement. "Immigration status does not play a factor in ESA eligibility, just like it does not affect whether or not a child can attend an Arizona public school."

Criticism of marketing

But state Sen. John Kavanagh, R-Fountain Hills, said he opposes marketing ESAs to people who are in the country illegally.

"We passed ESA to promote good education, not illegal immigration," Kavanagh said. "I strongly object to someone to try to divert public funding to people who are here illegally."

Kavanagh acknowledged that undocumented immigrants can legally use ESAs because federal law forbids the state from asking about a student's immigration status. But, he said, their participation should not be encouraged.

"The most we can do is not encourage it," Kavanagh said. "I don't believe in promoting illegal immigration or using taxpayers' dollars to sustain it."

Conservative special interests such as American Federation for Children and the Goldwater Institute, which have pushed for ESAs at the Legislature, have [for years marketed them to Arizona parents](#), in part, to combat criticism that the voucher program isn't as popular with the public as lawmakers have been led to believe.

Dawn Penich-Thacker, spokeswoman for Save Our Schools Arizona, said the outreach to those who are here illegally shows a disconnect between what some special-interest groups say and what they do. Save Our Schools is the group responsible for the [Proposition 305 ballot initiative asking voters if they want to keep or do away with the most-recent expansion](#) of the state's school-voucher program.

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"It just kind of speaks to the level of hypocrisy that exists with some of these special-interest dark-money groups," she said. "At the same time, they'll bang the drum of 'rule of law' and 'taxpayer accountability' and yet simultaneously be marketing to a population of families that we might speculate that some of their top donors don't want them marketing to."

Penich-Thacker said undocumented immigrants would have fewer rights at private schools and fewer avenues to address any problems they might encounter there.

"That's exploitative to put them in a private-vendor setting where they have fewer rights than they had before and at the same time funding your effort from donations from folks who are probably not in favor of promoting to undocumented families to begin with," she said.

History of voucher program

The Republican Legislature has a history of [overlooking problems with the ESA program](#) — including problems that conflict with traditionally GOP

issues such as waste, fraud and abuse of taxpayer money.

ESA money has reportedly been [used to fund an abortion](#). And the state has recovered [little of the money that has been spent inappropriately](#), including parents who have transferred funds into [529 college-savings plans](#) and then left the program, and parents who have pocketed the money and then sent their children to public schools.

Chris Kotterman, a lobbyist for the Arizona School Boards Association, said because they support school choice, GOP lawmakers look past the sort of waste they criticize in other programs.

"If it were any other government program, would the Legislature look the other way? Probably not," he said.

American Federation for Children focuses almost exclusively on promoting school choice, including ESAs, Kotterman said. But the group's base of support in the Legislature sees opposing illegal immigration as a red-meat issue to rally their supporters.

"It is pretty ironic that the same group that relies on conservative Republican support would be focused on outreach to immigrants," he said.

RELATED: [Think tank worked to control voucher program behind scenes, emails show](#)

Legality of the advertising

State Sen. Sylvia Allen, R-Snowflake, said it's the law that schools can't ask about immigration status, so there's no reason American Federation for Children shouldn't advertise to those who are here illegally.

"As long as the law states that, I don't believe the federation is doing anything wrong," Allen said. "If we make an issue out of that, why are they in any of our schools?"

Allen said she supports legal immigration and blames parents who brought their children here with them illegally. She said parents should be punished for coming here illegally but not the children.

Other Republicans who helped push the ESA bills through the Legislature and who have also backed measures opposing illegal immigration did not return calls and requests for comment. They include U.S. Rep. Debbie Lesko of Peoria, state Senate President Steve Yarbrough of Chandler and state Sen. Steve Smith of Maricopa.

American Federation for Children's Martinez said the group's outreach focuses on helping families who meet the eligibility requirements for the ESA program.

The last lines of the federation's outreach tell parents in Spanish: "These funds cover private school tuition, tutors, uniforms and more! Find out if your child qualifies!"

"Much of our outreach is in communities surrounding D or F rated public schools," Martinez said. "Many of those neighborhoods have a lot of Hispanic households, including many families where the parents only speak Spanish. Our communication on our website helps parents understand the requirements to enter the program and encourages parents to explore school-choice options available for their children."

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