

UT-Fits Scholarship Empowers Parents



SUMMARY

The shockwaves created by COVID-19 shut-downs continue to be felt throughout the education system. During school closures, parents were able to view firsthand the quality and content of their child's education as it happened. Many walked away disappointed. Parents began searching for viable alternatives to what they were witnessing. Withdrawal numbers skyrocketed. Homeschool pods and microschoools increased in popularity. Parents were able to creatively find and provide these educational opportunities, but as Utah returned to normal, parents have found this more difficult.

Rising inflation, coupled with an already high cost of living and skyrocketing housing prices in Utah, has put a strain on every family's budget and limited the educational opportunities of most families.

In 2021, Utah's Opportunity Scholarship came online, providing an education spending account for families of students with special needs. However, we can do more. Providing a universal education spending account through the UT-Fits Scholarship is the next logical step to empowering parents in education.

The UT-Fits Scholarship empowers parents, who know the needs of their children best.

Local Schools Failed Immigrant Family

Carter (name changed) is an African immigrant living in Salt Lake City. He and his family had an almost unbearable amount of stress put on them during the COVID-19 pandemic. His dad was stranded in Africa early on in the pandemic while visiting family. His mom was hospitalized for ten months during that first year of lockdowns and protocols.

Carter was barely reading at a second-grade level as an eighth grader. Prior to getting sick, his mother requested remedial classes and wanted him held back a year to give him time to catch up before high school. This never happened. It wasn't until his sophomore year that he was placed into special education.

As a junior, Carter isn't on track to graduate. The school is asking him to make up lost credits from his freshman and sophomore year, while maintaining his current grades as a junior. Children like Carter too often slip through the cracks of our public schools.

The lack of learning opportunities, unfortunately, is not the worst part about school for Carter. There are gangs, school fights, and constant bullying that he suffers through. He wants to learn, but it is hard to get excited about school when you fear for your own safety.

Carter and his mom (who is out of the hospital now) want him to be at a school where he feels safe and supported. More importantly, he needs an environment that meets him on his level and helps him excel. With the UT-Fits Scholarship, the

parents could find and use a private tutor, personalized curricula, or one of the new microschoools that became popular during the pandemic.

Rural Family Looking for Opportunities

LaDawn has had to fight to find opportunities for her son. As a mother in Duchesne, finding programs to challenge her son has always been a battle. As a sophomore, he completed every math course offered by his local high school. This left him unable to continue his math education.

Stymied by the school district's lack of offerings, LaDawn worked with the principal to use technology to provide higher-level math through Brigham Young University. The school worried about the cost and resources providing such an individualized education would take. They chose not to take action.

Undeterred, LaDawn tried to organize an advanced math club, but lack of financial support from the school led to the club being short-lived.

As LaDawn's son entered college, he constantly felt behind his peers because of his lack of advanced math classes in high school. Now, LaDawn's son could work from anywhere, but because of the lack of educational opportunity for his children in his hometown, he chooses to live somewhere with better educational options.

LaDawn's son could use the UT-Fits Scholarship to create a unique learning experience for his children, allowing him to return to the community that he loves.

What is the UT-Fits Scholarship?

The UT-Fits Scholarship is an education spending account.¹ These accounts are used by families to select the best education choices for their children. Parents are able to mix and match educational options, buying curriculum while paying for private lessons. They can pay for tuition and use any remaining funds to pay for experiential learning.

Parents who decide to use the UT-Fits Scholarship withdraw their students from the public or charter school and use the funds to create a truly individualized educational experience.

Eligibility

All Utah students are eligible for the UT-Fits Scholarship. Any Utah family can apply to become a scholarship recipient. Students from economically

The beauty of the UT-Fits Scholarship is the flexibility it gives to parents. Like other education spending accounts (ESA), the UT-Fits Scholarship can be used on a variety of educational resources.

disadvantaged families will have priority in scholarship awards.

How Can the UT-Fits Scholarship be Used?

The UT-Fits Scholarship can be used for:

- online learning
- tutors
- educational therapies
- tuition at the local applied technology school
- school tuition
- early college costs
- curriculum
- community courses
- art programs
- music classes
- experiential programs
- self-paced courses through Skillshare or Masterclass

The UT-Fits Scholarship can be used to mix and match any of these options.

Education Innovation

The UT-Fits Scholarship and other choice programs inspire innovation in education. Evidence of this can be found in the increased prevalence of microschoools across the country.²

Because of the small nature of these schools, they can easily adapt to new situations in ways that larger bureaucratic public schools cannot. Although education choice programs are not the only reason for innovation in education, the UT-Fits Scholarship does promote it.³

Due to public schools being funded by taxpayers, many education entrepreneurs are fighting an uphill battle when it comes to innovation. The UT-Fits Scholarship's flexible spending accounts provide an



incentive for education entrepreneurs to create something new.

Financial Accountability

The UT-Fits Scholarship has built-in financial accountability, which should address concerns of people who think there isn't education accountability outside of public schools. The scholarship has limits on how parents can spend the money provided, all while trying to preserve parents' freedom to provide the best education for their children.

The state auditor is authorized to audit the program regularly to ensure that the scholarship-granting organization and the scholarship families are following Utah law. This is appropriate accountability and should exist in any governmental program.

The UT-Fits Scholarship puts money into the hands of families. Parents have far more incentive to ensure

their children get a good education. Allowing them to direct the state education funds is a far more effective way to improve education outcomes in Utah.

Academic Accountability

The UT-Fits Scholarship provides academic accountability to the schools using the free market. Because parents are in charge of how the educational money is spent, they willingly change schools, tutors, or curriculum to meet the needs of their child. This is often phrased as letting parents vote with their feet.

It is the most effective accountability because the consumers choose what they like best and can change if it isn't what they expected. Education choice policies are often derided for this type of accountability.

Many lawmakers want some kind of testing requirement added to these programs, but testing requirements have little impact on actual student outcomes.⁴ In fact, test score increases show little impact on actual attainment later in life.

College attendance and graduation rates are a better measure for success than standardized testing. For example, students using the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship were 19 percent more likely to enroll in any college and 43 percent more likely to enroll in a four year college.⁵ Additionally, these students were 20 percent more likely to earn a degree.

But the entire discussion is moot because it assumes that one type of

outcome is desirable over another. The successful outcomes and education for each child are, of necessity, different. Why? Because each child is different. Parents know their children best and know what success for each child looks like.

The question then becomes, who gets to decide what is a quality education? Who gets to decide that one educational option is better than the next? This is the very reason grocery stores carry a variety of sodas. Some customers prefer Pepsi while others like Coke. The choice brings satisfaction to all of the customers.

Parents and students should be the ones who decide which educational fit is the best. When they are given

this choice, parents and students are more satisfied with their education.⁶ There is an ever-increasing demand from parents to be given a choice in how their child is educated.

Benefits to Minorities and Low-Income Families

Minority and low-income families have benefited from education choice programs across the nation. The UT-Fits Scholarship would be no different.

Data has shown that despite the increased spending in low-income schools, results continue to be low.⁷ Before the pandemic, only 30 percent of low-income students were proficient according to the Utah State Board of Education.⁸ Following the pandemic, that number dropped to 25 percent.

Minority and low-income families are more likely to live in school boundaries with failing schools.⁹ In Utah, Ogden School District stands out from other districts. Ogden has fewer adults with bachelor's degrees than other areas of the state. Ogden's poverty rate in 2020 was 17.4 percent, nearly double the state average of 8.8 percent. During that same time, Ogden School District had a graduation rate under 70 percent, which is one of the lowest in the state.

Shockingly, one in five minority or low-income students drop out of high school in Utah. Public schools are clearly not working for every child.

Higher income families can choose to live in neighborhoods with better schools.¹⁰ These same families



also have the financial resources to choose alternative education methods if the neighborhood school is not a good fit.

The UT-Fits Scholarship is a path for low-income families to find success for their children. Parents know when their child is struggling in school. They are in the best position and have the most incentive to help their child find a successful path.

Benefits to Rural Families

Approximately 11 percent of Utah's students attend a rural school. Although choice in education looks different in rural communities than it does along the Wasatch Front, the choices of parents are still significant.

Additionally, many high-achieving students leave their rural communities looking for better opportunities. This phenomenon, known as brain drain, impacts rural communities more than their urban or suburban counterparts.¹¹

The story of LaDawn Moon, shared in the introduction, highlights some of the need for choice in Utah's rural communities. The struggles of her son are not uncommon. Her report that he felt behind in mathematics throughout his college and postgraduate studies demonstrates the need for individualized education.

The UT-Fits Scholarship can help families like the Moons by providing funds to families to innovate in their communities. It provides parents with the flexibility to form a group for specialized instruction for their students.

The innovation is community based. Solutions in Roosevelt will be different from the solutions in Moab or Delta. Outsiders rarely know the needs of the individual community. Similarly, state standards are not tailored to communities or the individual student and their interests.

Unbundled Education

Unbundling a child's education allows parents to actively choose the methods, locations, and times that best suit their child's learning needs, rather than being limited to a traditional brick and mortar school setting. Homeschool families have been doing this for years.

Parents will often take on subjects like math and reading—subjects that benefit from individualized help. The families join a homeschool co-op for history, literature, or debate—subjects that are enhanced by discussion.

at home tend to be “happy, satisfied, and civically engaged.”¹² These individuals have a higher lifetime earnings than their public school peers and are more likely to be self-employed.

Parents who choose to home educate truly tailor their child's education. They are able to pick and choose from individual classes and courses to create an education that is as unique as the individual student.

It's Not New. Data Shows It Has Worked.

ESAs similar to the UT-Fits Scholarship have been around since 2011 with Arizona being the first state to pass one.¹³

Arizona is often seen as the state with the greatest educational freedom. Their educational choice measure includes their Education Empowerment Scholarship for students with special needs.

The UT-Fits Scholarship puts money into the hands of families. Parents have far more incentive to ensure their children get a good education.

Finally, parents enroll their child in dance, sports, piano, ninja courses, or a variety of other creative and physical activities that are suited to their child's interests. Families can even hire a world-leading expert to teach their child using today's video technology. The choices are endless. Students who have been educated

More recently, Arizona passed a universal ESA allowing all families across the state to use their education tax dollars to make education choices for their children.

Arizona has also been shown to be the best state in terms of educational outcomes. A study

by Stanford University shows that Arizona students have the highest proficiency increase and overall growth since 2001.¹⁴ Arizona has also seen some of the largest gains for minority students.

Government Overreach and Increased Homeschool Regulations

The UT-Fits Scholarship does not affect the homeschool status of any student in the state. That law is separate from this program, and this program does not modify the protections established by current homeschool law.

To help with this distinction, a homeschooled student has a specific definition in statute.¹⁵ These are families who fill out an affidavit with the local school district declaring their homeschool status.

There is another group of families who educate their children at home but are not considered homeschool students by statute.

These families participate in programs like My Tech High and Harmony Education. Although these families have taken the responsibility of educating their children, they access resources through the public schools.

Because they choose to use these programs, the program requires them to report weekly or quarterly.

Many of these families refer to themselves as homeschool families, and, in practice, the education looks very similar. However, by statute, these programs are part of the public school system.

The UT-Fits Scholarship would act in a similar space as My Tech High or Harmony Education. Recipients of the UT-Fits Scholarship would have to apply annually for the scholarship, but parents are allowed more freedom and flexibility with the funds. Additionally, there is no limit on the types of curriculum, classes, or resources that families can choose.

What Will Happen to Our Public Schools?

Arizona has a long history with education choice programs. Yet Arizona still has a robust public education system with the majority of students attending a public school.

As shown by earlier arguments, all of Arizona's students have benefited from increased proficiency and growth because of their choice programs.

The UT-Fits Scholarship will not disrupt public schools more than the typical student movement every year.

Conclusion

The UT-Fits Scholarship is an acknowledgement that the public school system is not the best fit for every child. There are many children around our state who need a different experience than what the public system can provide.

This program allows all parents to direct the education of their child regardless of their income level. Most parents will keep their children in public schools, but the UT-Fits Scholarship provides a method for parents to improve the experience of their child's education. Parents can tailor education to the needs and interests of their children.

Utah legislators should be concerned with the education of the children of Utah. The public school system is one way to educate, but it is far from the only way to educate.

The legislature should pass the UT-Fits Scholarship, because every child should have an education that fits.



PROPOSAL A: An ESA universally available to all Utah families

As documented in this policy brief, an ESA program provides significant benefits to parents and their children. These results should not be reserved only to families with children with special needs.

We propose a statewide ESA program allowing parents to dictate how education dollars are spent for their child without being confined to a particular school or system.

To phase in this program and help transition toward a new system, we propose instituting a graduated cap, reaching 25,000 Utah students by 2025.

All students eligible for enrollment in a public school would be eligible to participate in the UT-Fits Scholarship.

PROPOSAL B - An ESA available for low-income families

We can accurately predict which schools perform well on any testing standards based solely on the income level of the school.

With this in mind, the legislature should, at minimum, provide resources for families stuck in these schools as a way to find better education options. This can be done by funding families with incomes up to 400 percent of the federal poverty level, with future plans for universal eligibility.

Endnotes

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4. Michael Q. McShane, Patrick J. Wolf, and Collin Hitt, "Do Impacts on Test Scores Even Matter? Lessons from Long-Run Outcomes in School Choice Research," American Enterprise Institute - AEI, March 19, 2018, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/do-impacts-on-test-scores-even-matter-lessons-from-long-run-outcomes-in-school-choice-research/>.
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8. "Student Proficiency Results - USBE Data Gateway," Utah State Board of Education, accessed September 27, 2022, <https://datagateway.schools.utah.gov/Assessment/StudentProficiency/2021>.
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10. Daniel Buck, "School Choice: For All but the Poor," Foundation for Economic Education, February 24, 2019, <https://fee.org/articles/school-choice-for-all-but-the-poor/>.

For the remainder of the endnotes, please visit [Libertas.org/PB-surveillance](https://libertas.org/PB-surveillance)

PUBLIC POLICY BRIEF

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===== TO =====
FUNDAMENTAL
PRINCIPLES IS
ESSENTIAL
===== TO =====
THE SECURITY
===== OF =====
INDIVIDUAL
RIGHTS

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ARTICLE I, SEC 27