

Hobbs takes aim at regulating school vouchers

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Gov. Katie Hobbs released an eight-point plan to curtail the Empowerment Scholarships Account program, but the proposals, slated to run in Hobbs' executive budget and in the upcoming legislative session, caught near-immediate opposition from Republican leadership who claimed the governor fundamentally misunderstands the program.

Hobbs' plans and the subsequent response from Republicans fired the proverbial starting pistol for the feud over ESAs in the 2024 legislative session. The program stands as a key area of conflict in negotiating next year's budget as enrollment and cost estimates grow closer to the \$1 billion mark.

While Hobbs and Democrats continue to claim the program stands to "bankrupt the state," Republicans contend the program saves the state money and is not nearly the budget buster it's made out to be.

The proposals from Hobbs diverge from her call to end the program entirely in her state of the state address last session. Besides an ad hoc study committee, attempts from Democrats to curtail or enact further oversight of the program through legislation failed in 2023.

House Speaker Ben Toma, who sponsored the 2022 bill making the program universally available to students, told the *Arizona Capitol Times*, “I’m left with nothing but the clear impression that this is not serious.”

He continued, “If she were serious about proposed changes in the actual law, what she or her staff should have done is hold serious stakeholder meetings and discuss how this actually works in the real world.”

Hobbs’ eight points by-and-large targets private schools and seeks to enact standards resonant of those applied to public schools.

The plan requires minimum education standards and fingerprint clearance cards for private school instructors and ensures private schools provide disability accommodations and halt “price gouging” tuition. She adds plans to deploy further audits of the program by the Arizona Auditor General and direct the Arizona Department of Education to manually review purchases over \$500, disclose lost parental and student rights and report graduation and chronic absenteeism rates.

Finally, Hobbs floated a return to an ESA eligibility requirement to only allow students who spent at least 100 days in a public school to enroll in an ESA.

“With this plan, we can keep students safe, protect taxpayer dollars, and give parents and students the information they need to make an informed choice about their education,” Hobbs said in a statement. “Arizonans deserve to know their money is being spent on educating students, not on handouts to unaccountable schools and unvetted vendors for luxury spending.”

Toma deemed the proposals to be an attempt to “kill (ESA) by bureaucracy” and said Hobbs fails to understand how the program works in targeting private schools.

“ESAs are not an agreement between the state and private schools. ESAs are an agreement between the state and the parent,” Toma said.

As for further oversight from ADE, Superintendent Tom Horne noted ADE already manually audits all purchases and added the department had rejected more than 12,000 purchases in 2023.

Stacey Brown, an ESA parent and co-founder of Education for All AZ, said the program already sees a high level of scrutiny.

“When we purchase something, we need to take that item or whatever activity it is ... and then specifically provide the reason why it’s an educational expense and why it is beneficial to our child and why it’s beneficial to their learning,” Brown said. “And from there, we then submit it and numerous people at ADE have to go over it to make sure that it’s actually going to be a proper use of funds.”

Both Democratic leaders Sen. Mitzi Epstein, D-Tempe, and Rep. Lupe Conteras, D-Avondale, pledged their early support today in prepared statements.

But Toma said the plan had no true likelihood of passing, especially with no other information beyond the bullet points released.

“I eagerly await to see what those details are and decide how to handle the proposals,” Toma said. “But by and large, as it is ... it’s hard for me to take this as anything more than a cheap shot.”

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