

# Ariz. school vouchers often going to wealthier areas

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PHOENIX – As Arizona approaches two years since the universal expansion of the school voucher program, researchers at the Brookings Institution found that vouchers are handed out in disproportionately high numbers to families living in wealthy areas.

The Washington, D.C.-based think tank's report, released Tuesday, examined the most recent public data from Arizona's Empowerment Scholarship Account program, which allows families to use state money for educational expenses like private school tuition, supplies and tutoring. The program was formerly for select groups like students with disabilities but was expanded in 2022 to include all K-12 students not enrolled in public schools. Now, 77,451 kids are enrolled in the program.

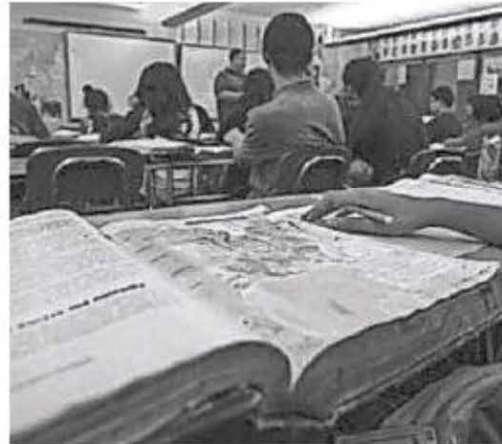
Brookings researchers found that ZIP codes with the lowest poverty rates – measured by the share of residents receiving public assistance income or food benefits – and the highest median incomes had the highest participation rates in the voucher program.

While there were about 20 voucher recipients per 1,000 people in ZIP codes with median incomes of less than \$47,404, there were about 74 per 1,000 people in ZIP codes with median incomes higher than \$114,968, the researchers found. The analysis examined data from an Arizona Department of Education report covering October through December 2023.

The report also found that areas with the highest college-going rates had the highest participation rates.

Jon Valant, a senior fellow at Brookings and the director of its education policy research center, said a common theme among school choice policies across the country is a stated aim to "create opportunities for families who may have the fewest opportunities," including families who may not be able to afford private school tuition.

Valant, one of the report's authors, said the researchers were interested in understanding who receives the funds



**Arizona's Empowerment Scholarship Account program was expanded in 2022 to include all K-12 students not enrolled in public schools.**

NICK OZA/ARIZONA REPUBLIC FILE

in a universal school choice program and if it's "realistically a path to making access to schools more equitable."

"With the data that are available, which shows the recipients of those funds by ZIP code, we can learn something about the recipients by learning about the characteristics of their home neighborhoods," Valant said. "What we find is that it's a highly disproportionate number of people who are getting access to ESA funds in Arizona – they live in very wealthy areas, they live in areas with very low poverty rates, and they live in areas with very high levels of educational attainment."

A spokesperson for EdChoice, a national organization that advocates for school choice policies like Arizona's voucher program, said the Brookings research doesn't reveal information about students' individual circumstances. The Arizona Department of Education, which administers the ESA program, doesn't collect information on recipients' income levels.

"Families within a given area (say, an affluent area) may vary significantly by need and circumstance, maybe even income," spokesperson Chantal Fennell wrote in a statement. "It might be the case that specific ESA families in generally affluent areas may not actually be 'affluent' and may desperately need the ESA program."