

Lawmakers Continue Defense Of ESAs After Latest Attack From Hobbs

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By Daniel Stefanski |

Arizona’s Republican legislative leaders continue to come to the unwavering aid of the state’s Empowerment Scholarship Account (ESA) Program.

After the ESA program sustained another political attack from Democrat Governor Katie Hobbs, House Speaker Ben Toma released a statement in support of the landmark school choice expansion for the state. Toma said, “Governor Hobbs continues to blast the ESA program as unsustainable and exceeding estimates. Neither are true. We remind the Governor that she leads the entire state of Arizona, and if she seeks changes to the ESA program, she ought to propose serious policies, not tweet vague threats. The State Legislature has yet to see any policy proposals from her office. Arizona will continue to responsibly fund students, not systems.”

✓ FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE 📷 Representative@RepBenToma and @AZHouseGOP

Arizona's K-12 Budget Is Right on Track: "Governor Hobbs continues to blast the ESA program as unsustainable and exceeding estimates. Neither are true," said Speaker Ben Toma. "We remind the Governor that she... pic.twitter.com/eNlnXwz2db

— Arizona House Republicans (@AZHouseGOP) October 11, 2023

According to the Speaker's press release, "the Department of Education reported on October 4 that the budget is currently on pace to have a year-end surplus of roughly \$77 million," adding that "the budget estimate of 68,000 total users (in the ESA program) is within 1% of the current program enrollment."

The Speaker's defense of ESAs came soon after Hobbs unleashed another attack against it, claiming that the program "threatens to decimate our state's budget." In a post on the platform "X," Governor Hobbs stated, "The school voucher program is unaccountable and unsustainable. It does not save taxpayers money, and it does not provide a better education for Arizona students...I call on Superintendent Horne, Speaker Toma, and President Petersen to join with bipartisan leaders to pass accountability and transparency measures, and bring an end to this wasteful, runaway spending."

The school voucher program threatens to decimate our state's budget.

I call on Superintendent Horne, Speaker Toma, and President Petersen to join with bipartisan leaders to bring accountability to the school voucher program and end the wasteful, runaway spending. pic.twitter.com/6pvsovlWBO

— Governor Katie Hobbs (@GovernorHobbs) October 11, 2023

Horne and Petersen also took time to respond to the governor's assertions, pushing back against her allegations and supporting the integrity of the program. Horne said, "The Governor's calculation is in error. She is counting the \$7,200 paid for each ESA student without offsetting the \$13,000 paid per student that would otherwise be spent for that student to attend a public school. The overall numbers bear this out as the expenditures for all public-school spending, including the ESA program are \$72 million below budget."

Petersen added, "Arizona families want choices for their children's education. ESAs are one of many choices the Legislature is prioritizing. The fact is, we budgeted for the 68,000 kids currently enrolled and have responsibly planned for incremental spending increases for this program in the years to come, as we do with a variety of other programs in our overall budget. We're always open to improving our state's programs, but for the sake of Arizona families who want to choose the best educational settings to meet their children's needs, ESAs are here to stay."

Since failing to address ESA changes in the state's budget, which was passed earlier this year, Governor Hobbs has increased her political volleys against the program, joining allies who were enraged at her perceived capitulation to Republican lawmakers. As a new legislative session nears, Hobbs and her staff will likely be more focused on exacting some concessions when the next round of budget negotiations resume in 2024. Ultimately, Arizona voters will have a significant role in determining the direction of the state's ESA program, whether by changes to the political party make-up of the legislature or through a yet-to-be-filed ballot initiative.

Daniel Stefanski is a reporter for **AZ Free News**. You can send him news tips using [this link](#).

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