



ESAs Could Give Educational Options to Low-Income Gifted Students

Published on *Show-Me Institute* (<https://showmeinstitute.org>)



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If a child begins the school year behind his peers, we want the school to help him catch up. But it doesn't follow that we want children who start the year *ahead* of their peers to backslide to the point that they are merely performing at grade level when the school year ends. Some students might need to learn more than a year's worth of material in order to make up for lost ground, but every student deserves to make at least a full year's academic progress every school year.

Missouri's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) is aware that it isn't always easy for schools to nurture the talents of gifted students. On its website, [DESE defines gifted children](#) as those who:

exhibit precocious development of mental capacity and learning potential as determined by competent professional evaluation to the extent that continued educational growth and stimulation could best be served by an academic environment beyond that offered through a standard grade level curriculum.

It's a significant acknowledgment: The standard grade-level curriculum isn't the best fit for gifted students. DESE provides [guidelines](#) for gifted education programs, but with an important condition: "It is the district's responsibility to use the foundation funding they receive to support their gifted program."

Depending on the number of gifted students in a district, and also on the other priorities competing for funding, it may not be feasible for some districts to offer gifted programming. In Missouri there are 38,870 gifted students, 7,137 of which (18 percent) are not being served.

Parents whose gifted children aren't served by specific programming at their school are essentially on their own. If they have the money, there are always trips to the museum, online courses, and even individual tutoring. But many families don't have the resources to supplement their children's education. Of those 7,137 unserved gifted students in Missouri, 1,313 of them qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, an indicator of low family income.

One option for helping low-income gifted students is [Education Savings Accounts](#) (ESAs). An [ESA is a flexible account](#) that could provide such gifted students funds to invest in their talents with books, tutoring, online programs, or other services. A \$1,000 ESA for each of the 1,313 unserved low-income gifted students in Missouri would only cost \$1.3 million out of the overall [\\$5.9 billion budget passed for 2017](#).

DESE itself has stated that gifted students need educational options that go beyond what traditional curriculum can offer. Giving parents of low-income gifted children the resources to supplement their education—without burdening their schools with the obligation to develop programming they might not be able to afford—is an option worth considering.

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Abigail Burrola graduated from Azusa Pacific University with a bachelor's degree in political science in 2018.

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