



UNDERSTANDING EDUCATION SAVINGS ACCOUNTS

GENERAL INFORMATION

What is the Student First Act?

The Student First Act makes state education funding available for eligible Iowa K-12 students who choose to attend accredited private schools. It also provides public schools additional funding for students who live in their district but attend private schools.

What is an Education Savings Account?

An Education Savings Account (ESA) is a deposit of public funds into government-authorized savings accounts which eligible families may use to cover tuition, fees, and other qualified education expenses at accredited private schools in Iowa. Parents who enroll their eligible children in an accredited private school will receive an estimated \$7,598 per pupil for the 2023-2024 school year. Funds are deposited into the student's ESA each year until the student graduates high school or turns 20. The remaining balance is returned to the state general fund.

What are qualified educational expenses?

Parents and guardians must use Education Savings Account payments for all qualified educational expenses. Qualified educational expenses include tuition and fees at a nonpublic school, textbooks, fees or payments for educational therapies, including tutoring or cognitive skills training, curriculum fees, software, and materials for a course of study for a specific subject matter or grade level, tuition or fees for nonpublic online education programs, tuition for vocational and life skills education approved by the department of education, educational materials and services for pupils with disabilities from an accredited provider, including the cost of paraprofessionals and assistants trained in accordance with state law, standardized test fees, and advanced placement examinations or examinations related to postsecondary education admission or credentialing.

Qualified educational expenses do NOT include transportation costs for the pupil, the cost of food or refreshments consumed by the pupil, the cost of clothing for the pupil, or the cost of disposable materials, including but not limited to paper, notebooks, pencils, pens, and art supplies.

Who is eligible for ESA funds, and when will funds be made available?

According to the chart below, the new law will be phased in over three years, beginning with the 2023-2024 school year.

YEAR 1 (2023-2024)

- All Kindergarten students.
- All public school students.
- Private school students at or below 300% of Federal Poverty Level (\$90,000 for a family of four).

YEAR 2 (2024-2025)

- All Kindergarten students.
- All public school students.
- Private school students at or below 400% of Federal Poverty Level (\$120,000 for a family of four).

YEAR 3 (2025-2026)

- All K-12 students in Iowa. *Regardless of income.*



How do I apply for ESA funds?

Details, including the application start date, will be provided soon. Once an eligible student is accepted into the ESA program, they will remain in the program until high school graduation or age 20. Annually, parents will need to verify their child's enrollment at an accredited non-public school. The process and timeframe for the distribution of ESA funds are still being determined. For more information, visit the Iowa Department of Education [website](#) and sign up to receive updates.

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

How will ESAs affect our school's mission and culture?

The new ESA legislation maintains the independence of private schools. As a Catholic school, faith will remain central to our mission. No restrictions or changes to our curriculum will result from this legislation. We will continue to offer Mass, Religion classes, and other faith activities.

Will class sizes increase dramatically?

We know parents value personal attention for their students and a close-knit community. This new legislation will not increase class size guidelines. We will welcome new students in grades with open seats according to our current enrollment process. Enrollment growth will be gradual over the next few years.

Will current students be guaranteed a spot at their school? Will current families with younger children be given priority?

Current Diocese of Des Moines students in grades K-8 will be guaranteed enrollment if registered by their school's deadline according to the school's enrollment process. For all other students, the Diocese of Des Moines Catholic Schools will prioritize enrollment accordingly:

1. Siblings of current students
2. Parishioners
3. Catholics from other parishes
4. All other families during the open enrollment

Registration timelines will be announced for each category. Therefore, current families must register by their school's deadline to be guaranteed enrollment for the 2023-2024 school year.

Are the Diocese of Des Moines Catholic Schools accredited?

All 16 Diocese of Des Moines Catholic schools are fully accredited through the state of Iowa and meet or exceed the education standards of Iowa Code section 256.11.

Are all teachers licensed and endorsed to teach in their assigned area?

All of our teachers are licensed by the Board of Educational Examiners of the State of Iowa. In addition, the state of Iowa verifies that our faculty are teaching in their licensed subject areas annually.

Do you welcome non-Catholic students?

While the Catholic faith is integral to all aspects of school life, we welcome families of all faith traditions into our school communities. Across the Diocese of Des Moines, 12% of our current students are not Catholic.

Will our Catholic schools become more diverse due to the ESA legislation?

Our schools reflect the population we serve; during the 2021-2022 school year, our student population was 31% racially diverse. We anticipate our schools will continue to grow in student diversity. Our mission is to serve all families who desire a Catholic education.



Do Catholic schools accept students with diverse learning needs?

Our Catholic schools are committed to working with all learners to the best of our ability, including children who may require additional support. Several of our schools have faculty endorsed in special education. Additionally, all faculty benefit from professional development in differentiating instruction to support whole-child development. Our process is to work with parents and the local public school district of students with Individual Education Plans (IEP) to provide the services identified to meet the academic and behavioral needs of the child. There are some needs we are not able to accommodate, and these decisions are based on the best interests of the child.

TUITION & TUITION ASSISTANCE

Will tuition next year be increased to match the \$7,598 included in the ESA?

No. The Diocese of Des Moines Schools will continue implementing a multi-year plan for tuition increases to address teacher compensation inequities. According to the 2021-2022 Diocesan Annual Report, the average cost to educate a student in our schools was \$7,684 in grades K-8 student and \$13,110 in grades 9-12. We want our families and supporters to know that the cost of providing an exceptional faith-based education continues to increase each year. We continue efforts to align our faculty salaries with public school teacher salaries and the salary standards for the teaching profession.

What if the amount of the ESA is greater than the cost of tuition?

Any ESA funds beyond the cost of tuition and other qualifying expenses will remain in the student's account through high school graduation. Therefore, the account balance can grow during the K-8 years and help cover the costs of high school tuition and fees at Saint Albert Catholic and Dowling Catholic High Schools through graduation or age 20.

What about Tuition Assistance?

Tuition assistance will still be provided to families through the Diocese or the Catholic Tuition Organization (CTO) or local tuition assistance. The need for tuition assistance is ongoing as the cost of providing an exceptional faith-based education continues to increase. The goal remains to provide tuition assistance to families desiring a Catholic education for their children. CTO donors are encouraged to continue to support tuition assistance, and any family eligible for tuition assistance is encouraged to apply.

All families who meet the income guidelines below will need to complete a FAIR application no later than April 15. The application will be used to determine eligibility for both CTO and Diocesan tuition assistance. Families who meet these income guidelines are asked to apply for tuition assistance even if they qualify for an ESA. The ESA process and timeframe for the distribution of funds are still being determined.

FAMILY SIZE	CTO MAXIMUM INCOME	DIOCESAN TUITION ASSISTANCE MAXIMUM INCOME
2	\$78,880	\$98,600
3	\$99,440	\$124,300
4	\$120,000	\$150,000
5	\$140,560	\$175,700
6	\$161,120	\$201,400
7	\$181,680	\$227,100
8	\$202,240	\$252,800

CHURCH AND STATE

If we have a separation of Church and State, how can the state fund ESAs?

School choice is constitutional at the federal level and in most states. In addition, the U.S. Supreme Court has made it clear that public funding can be allocated to a family to spend on a child's K-12 schooling, including faith-based education (EdChoice, 2023). This legislation provides parents with the right to choose the best educational options for their child - private or public.

Why does the Diocese of Des Moines and the Catholic Church support ESAs?

Advocating for parental choice in education follows a long tradition in the Catholic Church. The Catholic Catechism says, "Parents have the first responsibility for the education of their children," (2333). In 1965, Pope Paul VI wrote during the Second Vatican Council, "Parents who have the primary and inalienable right and duty to educate their children must enjoy true liberty in their choice of schools. Consequently, the public power, which has the obligation to protect and defend the rights of citizens, must see to it, in its concern for distributive justice, that public subsidies are paid out in such a way that parents are truly free to choose according to their conscience the schools they want for their children," (Gravissimum educationis, 6).

Why is tithing still important?

There are many ministries supported through parishioner tithing, not just Catholic education. Tithing will continue to support Catholic schools, additional ministries and the shared mission of our Church. While ESAs will help make Catholic education accessible to more families, the financial partnership between parishes and schools will not change at this time. ESAs enable us to adjust but not eliminate our current model of parish support, tuition, and fundraising. Our collaboration with pastoral leadership is vital to the success of our Catholic schools, and we will continue to work closely with pastors as we navigate the implementation of ESAs.