
FAMILIES' EXPERIENCES ON THE NEW FRONTIER OF EDUCATIONAL CHOICE

Findings from a Survey of K–12
Parents in Arizona

Andrew D. Catt
Albert Cheng



ABOUT EDCHOICE

EdChoice is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to advancing full and unencumbered educational choice as the best pathway to successful lives and a stronger society. EdChoice believes that families, not bureaucrats, are best equipped to make K-12 schooling decisions for their children. The organization works at the state level to educate diverse audiences, train advocates and engage policymakers on the benefits of high-quality school choice programs. EdChoice is the intellectual legacy of Milton and Rose D. Friedman, who founded the organization in 1996 as the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Arizona is arguably the nation's most innovative state for educational choice. It has a thriving charter school sector that serves 16 percent of the state's students in 556 charter schools.ⁱ The state has also launched several groundbreaking programs for families to attend private schools. In 1997, Arizona passed the nation's first tax-credit scholarship (TCS) program, and the state's four TCS programs awarded 73,566 scholarships in 2015–16 for attendance at private schools to students with special needs, students in foster care, students from low-income families, and other highly vulnerable student populations.ⁱⁱ In 2011, Arizona became the first state to enact an education savings account (ESA) program. Referred to as Empowerment Scholarship Accounts, the program currently provides up to 90 percent of a child's state-level per-pupil funding allotment to more than 6,000 families for private school tuition, online learning, educational therapy, tutoring, fees at postsecondary institutions, and other individual educational needs.ⁱⁱⁱ

Over the past two decades, evaluations of school choice policies around the country have tended to focus on how these policies affect student performance on standardized tests. Yet, parents routinely report that academic achievement is only one of many reasons factoring into their decisions to engage in school choice.^{iv} Broader assessments of school choice based on families' priorities are

needed to understand the different ways that school choice policies may support families' educational needs. The varied influences underlying families' choices may be particularly salient in Arizona where school choice policies aim to serve diverse student needs, ranging from special education therapy to college preparatory education.

In this report, we seek to broaden understanding of Arizona's school choice programs by analyzing a large survey of 3,577 parents with children in K–12 schools throughout the state. Our analyses compare rates of parental involvement at home and at school as well as parent perceptions of school safety, relationships, discipline, and the overall quality of the learning environment across the following five groups of parents: (1) traditional public school parents, (2) charter school parents, (3) current private school parents using an ESA, (4) current private school parents using a TCS, and (5) private school parents who do not use ESA or TCS programs (i.e. non-program). In some areas of the report, we also present responses from families no longer using the ESA or TCS programs, with reasons ranging from graduating or no longer meeting eligibility requirements to choosing to no longer use. Results from this report help to expand not only understanding of how traditional public, charter, and private schools all contribute to the common good, but also offer important insight into educational savings accounts and tax-credit scholarship programs.

ⁱ Authors' calculations; Arizona Department of Education (2017), 2016-2017 School Year [Data file], retrieved November 1, 2018 from <https://cms.azed.gov/home/GetDocumentFile?id=593flcf13217e112704d0309>

ⁱⁱ Authors' calculations; EdChoice (2019), *The ABCs of School Choice: The Comprehensive Guide to Every Private School Choice Program in America*, 2019 Edition, pp. 87–94, retrieved from <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/The-ABCs-of-School-Choice-2019-Edition.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., pp. 15–16

Key findings from our survey:

- Parents across school sectors report valuing many different aspects of schooling (e.g. academics, extracurricular offerings). Parents currently participating in an educational choice program were two to five times more likely than both charter and traditional parents to say that “diversity” was their most influential factor for choosing their child’s school. Parents in the sample who use ESA and TCS programs to attend private schools report placing more value on “instilling religious or moral character” than other parents in the sample do.
- Charter schools received the highest ratings on four of five measures of school climate with charter school parents providing higher ratings than traditional public, private (non-program), current ESA, and current TCS parents on school safety, parent-teacher relationships, appropriateness of disciplinary strategies, and assessments of how welcoming the school staff are. These results may provide insight into why charter schools have perceivably thrived in Arizona.
- Fifteen percent of current ESA parents reported that their child attends a special education private school whose core focus is to provide specialized support to students with special needs.
- Charter school parents reported higher participation than traditional public school parents on six school-based parental involvement activities while all three groups of private school parents (i.e. current ESA, current TCS, and non-program) reported higher participation than traditional public schools on four out of six school-based parental involvement activities.
- Parents with children in charter schools as well as private school parents who currently use ESAs and other private school (non-program) parents gave more favorable ratings of their schools’ disciplinary practices than parents with children in traditional public-schools—a notable finding given that some charter and private schools have been criticized for their approaches to student discipline.^v

^{iv} Heidi H. Erickson (2018), How Do Parents Choose Schools and What Schools Do They Choose? A Literature Review of Private School Choice Programs in the United States, *Journal of School Choice*, 11(4), pp. 491–506, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15582159.2017.1395618>

^v Joanne W. Golann (2015), The Paradox of Success at a No-Excuses School, *Sociology of Education*, 88(2), pp. 103–119, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0038040714567866>; Ellen Tuzzulo and Damon T. Hewitt (2006), Rebuilding Inequity: The Re-emergence of the School-to-Prison Pipeline in New Orleans, *High School Journal*, 90(2), pp. 59–68, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/hsj.2007.0009>; Kevin G. Welner (2013), The Dirty Dozen: How Charter Schools Influence Student Enrollment, *Teachers College Record* [Online only], retrieved from <http://www.tcrecord.org/PrintContent.asp?ContentID=17104>

INTRODUCTION

Arizona comprises one of the nation's most diverse environments for educational choice.¹ While the state has a large network of traditional public schools that are governed by local school boards, it has distinguished itself in the area of school choice over the past 25 years, becoming a pioneer in the charter school movement and enacting tax-credit scholarship (TCS) programs and an education savings account (ESA) program. These policies have rapidly expanded educational options for families across the state and may have reduced in-state declines in private school enrollments during a period when many of the country's private schools have experienced drops in enrollment.²

In 1994, Arizona became a forerunner in the charter school movement, passing an ambitious charter school law.³ Today, 16 percent of the state's public school students attend charter schools—the highest proportion of public-school students enrolled in charter schools of all 50 states.⁴

Soon after the passage of its charter school law, Arizona launched the nation's first TCS program in 1997. Tax-credit scholarships allow individuals or corporations to receive a tax credit for donating to a qualifying non-profit scholarship granting organization, known in Arizona as School Tuition Organizations (STOs). The Original Individual Income Tax Credit Scholarship program, Arizona's first TCS program, offered private school tuition subsidies to any student in the state. Building on this program in 2006, the state legislature passed the Low-Income Corporate Income Tax Credit Scholarship Program to provide private school scholarships to students from households with incomes at or below 185 percent of threshold for federal free and reduced-price lunch eligibility (\$85,905 for a family of four in 2018–19). Later in 2009, the legislature enacted Lexie's Law for Disabled and Displaced Students, a TCS program for which only foster children and those with special needs are eligible. Supplementing the Original Individual Income Tax Credit Scholarship program, a fourth program—the “Switcher”

Individual Income Tax Credit Scholarship Program—was added in 2012. To distribute private school scholarships through these programs, state-designated school tuition organizations disburse funds to students for use at private schools. More than 73,500 scholarships were awarded by these organizations in Arizona during the 2015–16 school year.⁵

In 2011, Arizona was at the forefront of educational policy innovation yet again, establishing the first education savings account program in the country (referred to as Empowerment Scholarship Accounts in Arizona). Other states have since followed suit. Five states have adopted ESA programs of their own, and many other states are considering legislation that would establish them.⁶ Parents may use funds from ESAs for private-school tuition, online learning, educational therapy, tutoring, fees at postsecondary institutions, or any combination of these educational services. Students in households that earn up to 250 percent of poverty line (\$62,750 for a family of four in 2018–19) are eligible to receive funding at levels equal to 90 percent of the per-pupil allotment given by the state to the public school (charter or district-run) that they previously attended. Average annual funding is currently worth approximately \$5,600 per student, while students designated as having special needs receive additional funding depending on the types of specialized services they require. More than 6,000 students in Arizona, many of whom have special needs, used an ESA in Fall 2018.⁷ The Arizona Department of Education reports that 58 percent of families using ESAs have children with special needs, suggesting that ESAs offer the flexibility to serve unique educational needs for a highly vulnerable student population.⁸

In addition to serving families with diverse educational needs and backgrounds, Arizona's school choice programs may have also enhanced the quality of educational options available to families in the state. On the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), largely considered the country's most rigorous examination,⁹ student performance in math and reading in Arizona has risen steadily over the past 15 years.¹⁰ The extent to

which these gains are directly attributable to school choice policies is uncertain, although average growth in student achievement in Arizona has occurred alongside the expansion of school choice. Whether or not school choice has increased student scores on standardized examinations, test scores represent only one educational priority.¹¹ The quality of relationships in the school community, opportunities for parent participation and parent decision-making in school, attentiveness to individual student needs, and the overall learning atmosphere are indicators of school performance that may play a crucial role in student development and life success. Parent perceptions of such indicators may then be an important source of information on school quality that is not captured by standardized examinations.¹² In Arizona's diverse landscape for K–12 education, however, little is known about how parents perceive the learning environments across traditional public, charter, and private school sectors. Furthermore, within the state's private school sector, where there has been considerable policy innovation, there is much to learn about families who specifically use education savings accounts and tax-credit scholarships to attend private schools.

In this report, we analyze a large survey of 3,577 parents with children attending schools in Arizona. We compare the rationales underlying parents' school selections; rates of parental involvement at home and at school; and parent perceptions of school safety, relationships, discipline, and the overall quality of the learning environment for the following five groups of parents: (1) traditional public school parents, (2) charter school parents, (3) private school parents currently using an ESA, (4) private school parents currently using a TCS, and (5) private school parents who do not participate in ESA or TCS programs (non-program users). In some areas of the report, we also present responses from former ESA and TCS families. Our report aims to move beyond test scores as the sole means of assessing school choice policies to provide a broader understanding of school characteristics that support student wellbeing.¹³

METHODOLOGY AND DATA SOURCES

The online survey solicited responses from Arizona parents with a child in kindergarten through 12th grade during the 2017–18 or 2016–17 school years. These parents could have a child enrolled in a district (neighborhood) public school, a magnet school, a public charter school, or a private school. Parents with children who are homeschooled are also included in the sample. A portion of the private school parents participated in one of Arizona's educational choice programs—either the Empowerment Scholarship Accounts (ESA) program or one of the tax-credit scholarship (TCS) programs—but not all of them.

Responses to the survey were solicited primarily through a panel company, The Logit Group. Using proprietary methods, Logit identified the email addresses of Arizona parents to whom the survey could be sent. A soft launch of the survey was initiated on June 14, 2018. On June 21, after receiving 103 complete responses and verifying that no changes needed to be made to the survey, the full launch of the survey was initiated. At this time the survey was distributed to 42,025 unique email addresses of Arizona parents. Additional screener questions were included in the survey to ensure that all respondents live in Arizona and either currently have, or within the last two years have had, school-age children. Following the initial email inviting parents to participate in the survey, each panelist received up to two reminder emails. The reminders were sent on a continuous basis until the end of the field. By the time the survey closed on July 12, 3,554 complete and 201 partial responses were received, resulting in an 8.9 percent response rate.

In addition to the distribution of the survey through the panel company, a snowball sampling technique was employed to receive a greater number of responses from parents using one of Arizona's educational choice programs. Snowball sampling is a surveying method using a

nonprobability sample to contact members of hard-to-reach or hidden populations. On June 18, 2018, EdChoice emailed the heads of 63 school tuition organizations (STOs), asking them to share the survey link with the families participating in one or more TCS programs. One of these STO leaders was also the head of the Arizona STO Association (ASTOA), and he was asked to send the survey link to ASTOA's list. By the time the survey closed on July 12, 86 complete and 37 partial responses were received from this snowball sampling phase of the distribution. Since it is unknown how many families received the survey invitation from STO heads, it is not possible to calculate a response rate for this part of the survey distribution.

Before analyzing the results of the survey, a portion of respondents were dropped because they were not qualified to take the survey (i.e., not being the parent of a school-aged child in Arizona within the last two years), answered too few questions in the survey, or provided specious responses. Responses were identified as specious for such reasons as speeding through the survey (i.e., completing it in less than half the median time) or repeatedly selecting the same response across multiple matrix-style, Likert-grid questions. Respondents who reported their child as currently using an ESA

or TCS were dropped if they claimed to be using the program for a public school. A total of 1,633 respondents of the 5,511 total responses received were dropped from the analysis.¹⁴

Taking the responses received from each of these two distributions together, a total of 3,577 parents responded to the survey and were included in the analysis. With roughly 1,194,000 children enrolled in Arizona schools or homeschooled in Arizona, and assuming each parent responded to the survey for one child, the overall survey sample has a margin of error of about +/-1.57 percent.¹⁵ See Appendix 2 for the margin of error for particular parent groups, based on the type of school their child attends.

Because we utilized a snowball sampling technique, the descriptive differences presented throughout the report are not necessarily representative of the population of parents in each school sector. Furthermore, the analyses are primarily descriptive, and results should not be interpreted as establishing causal effects based on school or program type. A detailed review of the survey design, data collection, and data analysis procedures can be found in Appendix 3.

TABLE 1 Overview of Sample

	Traditional Public	Charter
Highest Education Level		
Four-year Degree	26	34
High School or Less	26	21
Household Income		
\$45,500 or less	48	39
\$45,501 to \$99,999	38	43
At least \$100,000	14	18
Race/Ethnicity		
White (Non-Hispanic)	62	59
Non-white	38	41
Total Respondents in Sample (#)	2,370	497
Segment as Percent of Total Sample	66	14

Note: All numbers are percentages unless otherwise noted.

In reporting results, we disaggregate responses within the private school sector into the following three sub-classifications: (1) current ESA user, (2) current tax-credit scholarship user, and (3) non-program user. In other words, private school non-program users are parents with children in private schools who do not use an ESA or a TCS. We separately report results for parents in the two remaining categories: charter school parents and traditional public school parents. In some areas of the report, we also provide responses from former ESA and former TCS families.

they serve wealthy white families who can already afford private school tuition, but ESA parents in our sample are most likely to be non-white among the five parents groups.¹⁷ Moreover, more than two out of five ESA parents report annual household incomes that would qualify for the FRL program, and nearly one-quarter report having a high school education or less.

Table 1 presents an overview of the sample of parent respondents to the survey. We highlight several notable differences across the groups of parents in our sample. In the sample, traditional public school parents are most likely to report an annual household income of less than \$45,500, accounting for nearly half of all traditional public school parents (48%). That amount is approximately the threshold for a family of four to be eligible for the federal free and reduced-price lunch (FRL) program in 2017–18 (the school year preceding our interview dates).¹⁶ Nearly 40 percent of parents in the other four groups of the sample report annual household income of less than \$45,500. Importantly, critics of ESAs have claimed that

Private (Non-Program)	Current Tax-Credit Scholarship	Current Education Savings Account	Former Tax-Credit Scholarship	Former Education Savings Account
40	25	37	41	48
23	15	24	18	13
38	38	41	41	35
43	54	42	43	52
19	8	17	16	13
55	52	51	57	54
45	48	49	43	46
117	312	142	84	55
3	9	4	2	2

RESULTS

Education Savings Account and Tax-Credit Scholarship Programs

Within Arizona’s school sector, the state operates two of the nation’s most innovative types of educational choice programs: education savings account (ESA) and tax-credit scholarship (TCS) programs. These programs have grown rapidly since their inception, serving tens of thousands of families across the state. In analyzing responses to our survey, we identified families using these programs to understand who uses them, why parents decide to use these programs, and how parents feel about them.

In the sample, there are 142 parents who currently use educational savings accounts and 312 parents who currently use tax-credit scholarships to attend private schools. Table 2 presents a breakdown of parents currently using these programs by school type. Within this subsample, 62 percent of current TCS users and 42 percent of current ESA users attend private schools with a religious affiliation. Among current ESA users, 19 percent use ESA funds for multiple educational services.

Perceptions of the ESA and TCS programs are generally positive among participating families in our sample. More than two out of three current ESA parents (69%) and just under two out of three current TCS parents (63%) report being satisfied with their respective programs. By contrast, only 14 percent of current ESA parents and 18 percent of current TCS parents express dissatisfaction with them.

A higher percentage of former ESA parents (74%) and former TCS parents (74%) reported being satisfied with the respective programs compared to current program parents. This may potentially be due to reasons why they are no longer part of the program. More than half of former TCS parents said their family no longer meets eligibility requirements (37%) or the participating child graduated (26%). A lower percentage of former ESA parents said their family no longer meets program eligibility requirements (26%), but a higher percentage said the participating child graduated (28%).

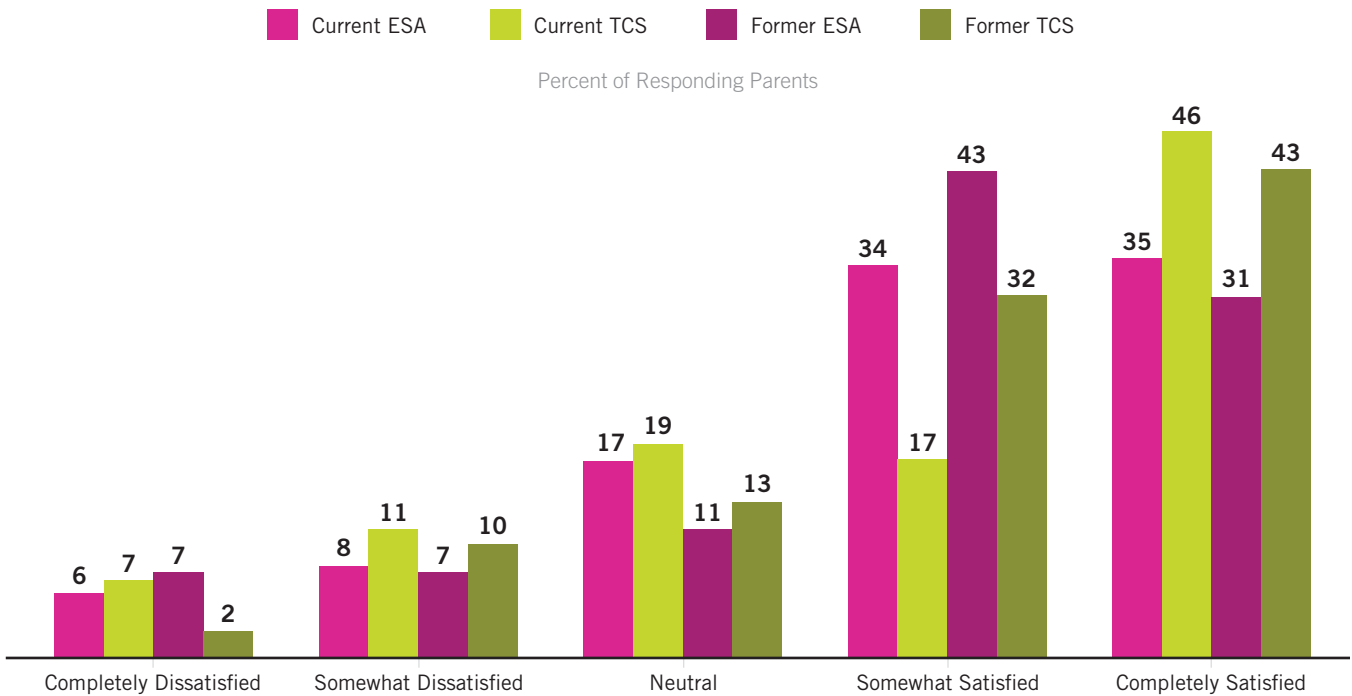
Although the sample sizes are small and the following results should be evaluated with caution, more than two-fifths of the former ESA parents (n=38) and former TCS parents (n=61) with children still in K–12 had their child transferred to a public district school after leaving the program (45% and 41%, respectively), regardless of reason for no longer participating in the program.

TABLE 2

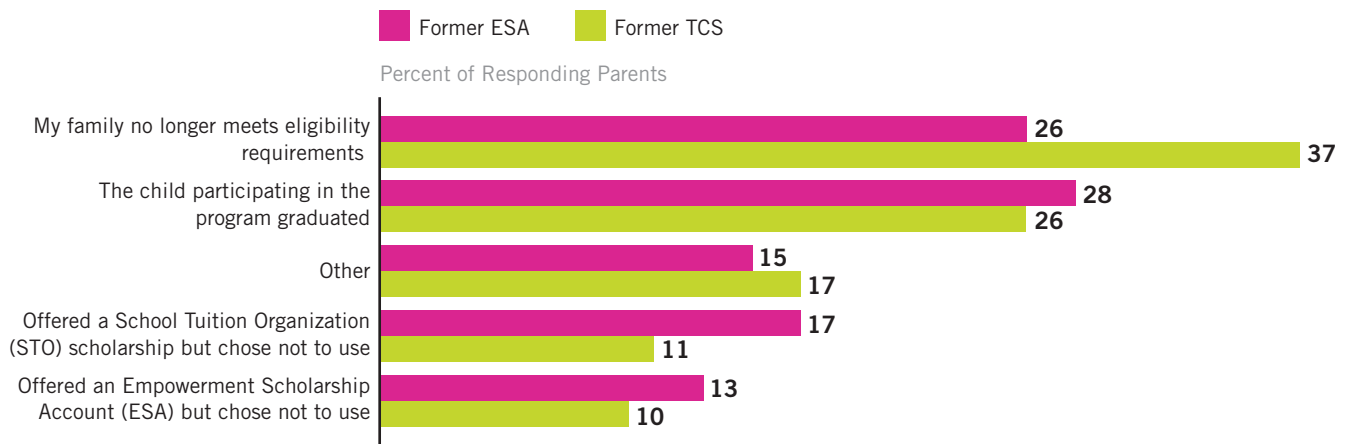
Arizona Parents in the Sample Currently Using Education Savings Account (ESA) and Tax-Credit Scholarship (TCS) Programs by School Type

School Type	Current TCS	Current ESA
Catholic	83	11
Protestant	104	47
Other Religious Private	5	1
Nonsectarian Private	74	23
Private Special Needs	17	21
Educated at Home	15	26
Multiple Educational Services	17	27
No Fulltime	14	13
Total	312	142

(Q8)

FIGURE 1**Parent Reports of Satisfaction with Arizona's Education Savings Account (ESA) and Tax-Credit Scholarship (TCS) Programs***Former program parents reported higher satisfaction levels than current program parents.*

number of parents responding (Q27 and Q28) = 140 Current ESA; 306 Current TCS; 54 Former ESA; 82 Former TCS

FIGURE 2**Why Arizona Parents No Longer Have Children Participating in Educational Choice Programs***Families were most likely to leave the education savings account (ESA) or tax-credit scholarship programs because they no longer meet program eligibility requirements or the participating child graduated.*

number of parents responding (Q31) = 53 Former ESA; 82 Former TCS

How Do Families Hear About the Education Savings Account and Tax-Credit Scholarship Programs?

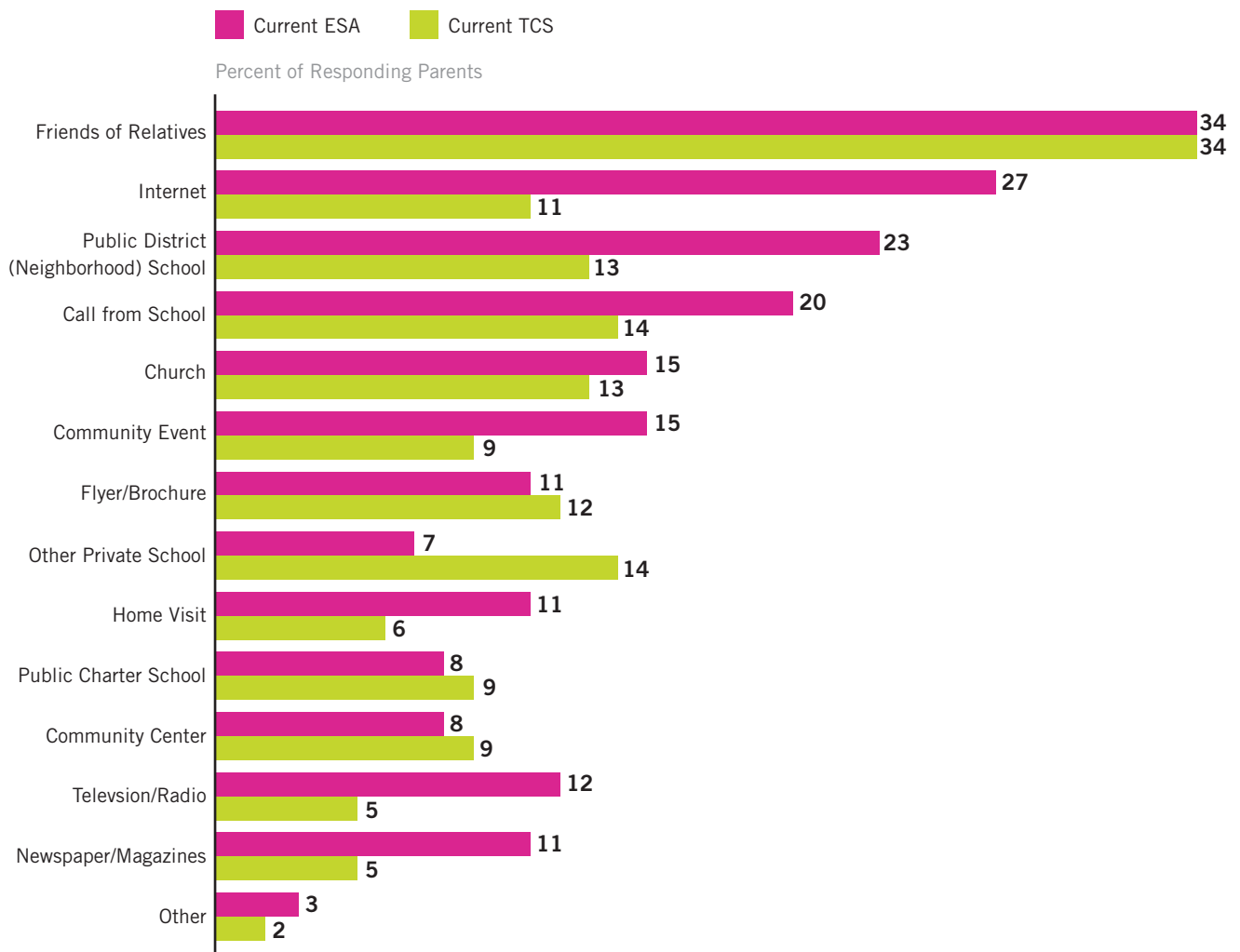
We asked parents how they initially heard about the ESA and TCS programs. More than one-third of each said friends or relatives (34%). Approximately one-fourth of current ESA parents said the internet (27%) or their neighborhood school (23%), while 14 percent of current TCS parents said they got a call from their current school or heard about the program(s) from another private school.

After listing all of the sources through which they initially heard about the programs, parents were asked which source they trusted the most. One out of five current ESA parents (20%) said “friends or relatives,” while nearly one out of four current TCS parents (28%) said the same. The next highest percentages fell to “public district (neighborhood) school” for current ESA parents (14%) and “church” for current TCS parents (11%).

FIGURE 3

How Arizona Parents Heard About Educational Choice Programs

Education savings account (ESA) parents were most likely to hear about the program via the internet or from their local public school. Tax-credit scholarship (TCS) parents were most likely to hear about the program from a private school.



number of parents responding (Q22) = 142 Current ESA; 312 Current TCS

Factors Underlying School Selection Among Education Savings Account and Tax-Credit Scholarship Users

When choosing a school, parents report having a variety of educational goals and priorities in mind. This diversity of educational preferences has been well documented in numerous surveys of parents across the country.¹⁸ The inception of ESA and TCS programs may have enabled parents to more easily select schools that they perceive to meet particular goals and priorities. On our survey, we explored this issue by asking parents what they believed to be the purpose of education. We further asked

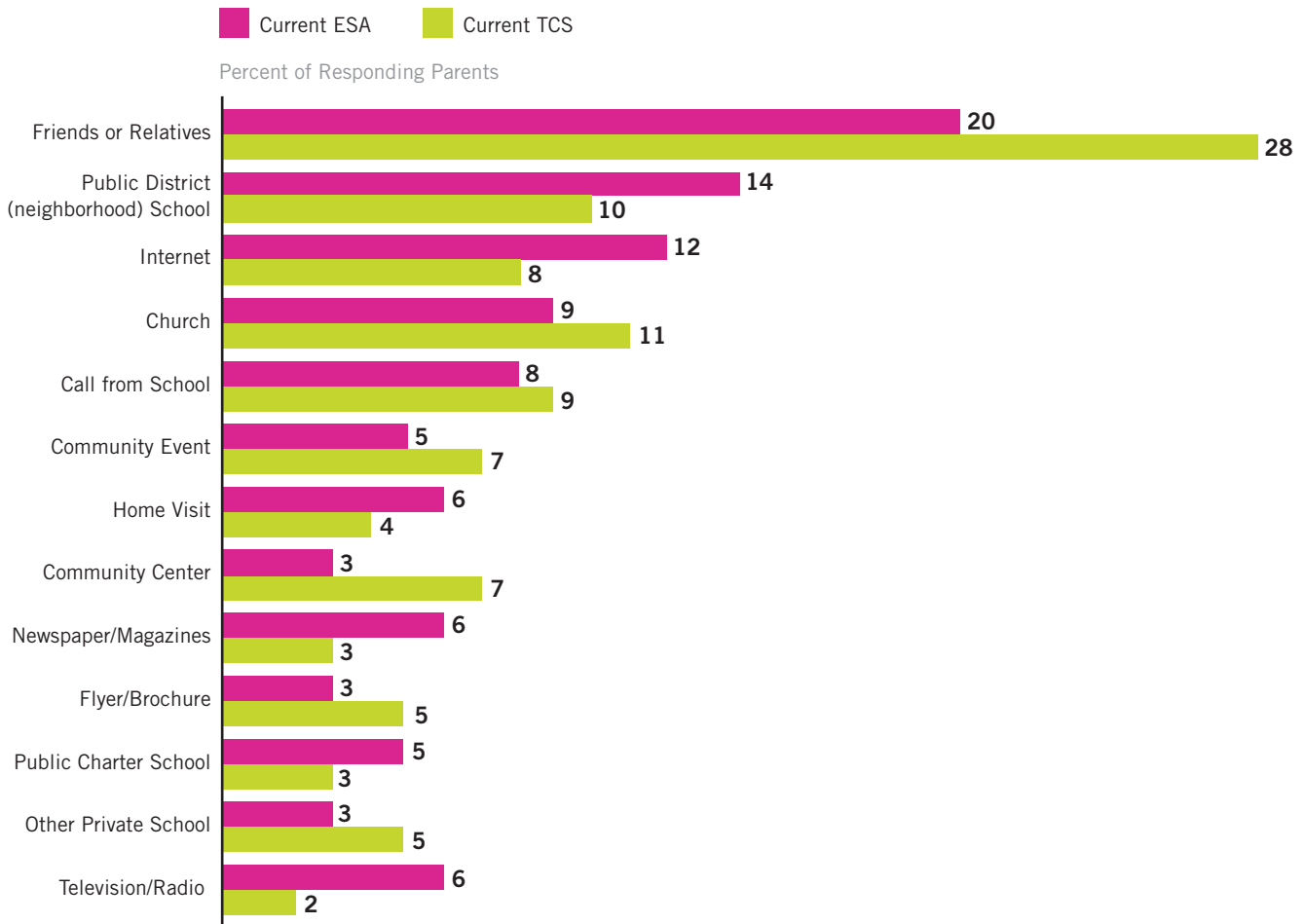
parents to identify school characteristics that were influential in selecting a school that their child currently attends.¹⁹

Table 3 presents parents’ beliefs about the purpose of education (see p.11). Parents who participate in ESA and TCS programs are distinguished by their conceptions of the purpose of education. At least 80 percent of parents with children in traditional public or charter schools believe that preparation for future employment and economic productivity are “very” or “extremely important” ends for education, but only 64 percent of current ESA and 63 percent of current TCS parents share this view. Parents of children currently participating in ESA and TCS programs are also slightly less likely than other parents to cite as “very or extremely

FIGURE 4

Arizona Parents' Most Trusted Source for Learning About Educational Choice Programs

Parents trust friends or relatives the most when it comes to learning about the education savings account (ESA) or tax-credit scholarship (TCS) programs.



number of parents responding (Q23) = 65 Current Education Savings Account; 105 Current Tax-Credit Scholarship

TABLE 3

Arizona Parents' Beliefs about the Purposes of Education

Percent Replying "Extremely Important" or "Very Important"

	Current Education Savings Account Families (%)	Current Tax-Credit Scholarship Families (%)
To provide children with the skills for future employment and economic productivity.	64	63
To guide students to become independent thinkers who form their own individual beliefs and opinions.	62	65
To prepare children for citizenship/civic life.	64	66
To empower children to fix social problems/injustices.	63	55
To instill religious virtues/moral character into children.	51	58

number of parents responding (Q52) = 140 Current Education Savings Account (ESA); 304 Tax-Credit Scholarship (TCS); 53 Former ESA; 82 Former TCS; 107 Private (Non-Program); 479 Charter; 2,274 Traditional Public

important” purposes of education: (1) preparing students for civic life, and (2) helping students become independent thinkers who form their own beliefs or opinions.

By contrast, more than half (58%) of current TCS families held the view that instilling “religious virtues or moral character” into children is a “very or extremely important” educational aim. Slightly lower proportions of current ESA and other private school (non-program) parents expressed the same sentiment (51% and 47%, respectively). Meanwhile, less than 30 percent of traditional public school families shared this same view. The rate among charter school parents is only marginally higher at 34 percent.

With current TCS families in the sample being most likely to assert that an important purpose of education is to instill religious virtues and moral character, it is perhaps unsurprising that they tend to choose schools that have defined missions and values. Current TCS families were most likely to prioritize the availability of “religious instruction or environment” when choosing a school for their child. Nearly one out of five current TCS families indicated this aspect as the most influential factor in choosing their child’s school. For private school parents who do not participate in the TCS or ESA programs, this rate was lower at 9 percent. The availability of religious instruction was the most important factor in choosing a school for 11 percent of current ESA parents. By contrast, barely any

public school parents expressed a preference for religious instruction and environments. Only one percent of traditional public school parents and one percent of charter school parents did so. These patterns regarding preferences for religious instruction across the five groups of parents were also relatively similar to patterns regarding preferences for a focus on morals, values, or character instruction.

Very few parents reported that the availability of extracurricular or special programs, such as arts, STEM, gifted, or bilingual education, was the most important factor for them. We note, however, that 15 percent of current ESA parents reported their child attends a private school that offered specialized support for students with special needs. Conversely, less than 1 percent of parents in the other sectors did the same. This finding underscores a key use of ESAs for students who may have disabilities or special needs that may be difficult to serve in conventional school environments. ESAs seem to provide the means for families to send their children to private schools or to use additional services that specialize in serving specific special needs. While 15 percent of current ESA families in our sample reported using ESA funds to enroll their child in a school offering specialized support for special needs, the Arizona Department of Education reports that 58 percent of ESA families have students with special needs of varying degrees.²⁰

Former Education Savings Account Families (%)	Former Tax-Credit Scholarship Families (%)	Private School (Non-Program) Families (%)	Charter School Families (%)	Traditional Public School Families (%)
72	82	72	85	84
70	78	71	84	83
70	72	65	74	74
58	63	64	61	64
49	52	47	34	27

All parents reported “academics” to be the most influential factor in choosing a school. More specifically, nearly one-fifth of current ESA parents (18%), one-quarter of current TCS parents (23%) and traditional public school parents (24%), and more than a quarter of non-program private school parents (29%) cite “academics” as the most influential factor. For charter school parents, this rate is considerably higher with nearly half of them (44%) citing “academics” as the most influential factor.

More than twice as many current ESA parents (13%) cited “school discipline” as the most influential factor compared to current TCS (5%), non-program private school (2%), charter school (2%), and traditional public school (2%) parents. The prevalence of families with children with special needs who use ESAs might play a role in explaining this pattern. An individualized learning environment may influence how well a school is able to support students with special needs. Accordingly, 14 percent of private non-program parents indicated “individual, one-on-one attention” as the most influential factor for choosing their school; this rate is notably a bit higher than other parents in the sample.

When it comes to diversity, parents currently participating in an educational choice program were two to five times more likely than both charter and traditional parents to say that “diversity” was their most influential factor (see Figure 5 on p. 10).

School Climate

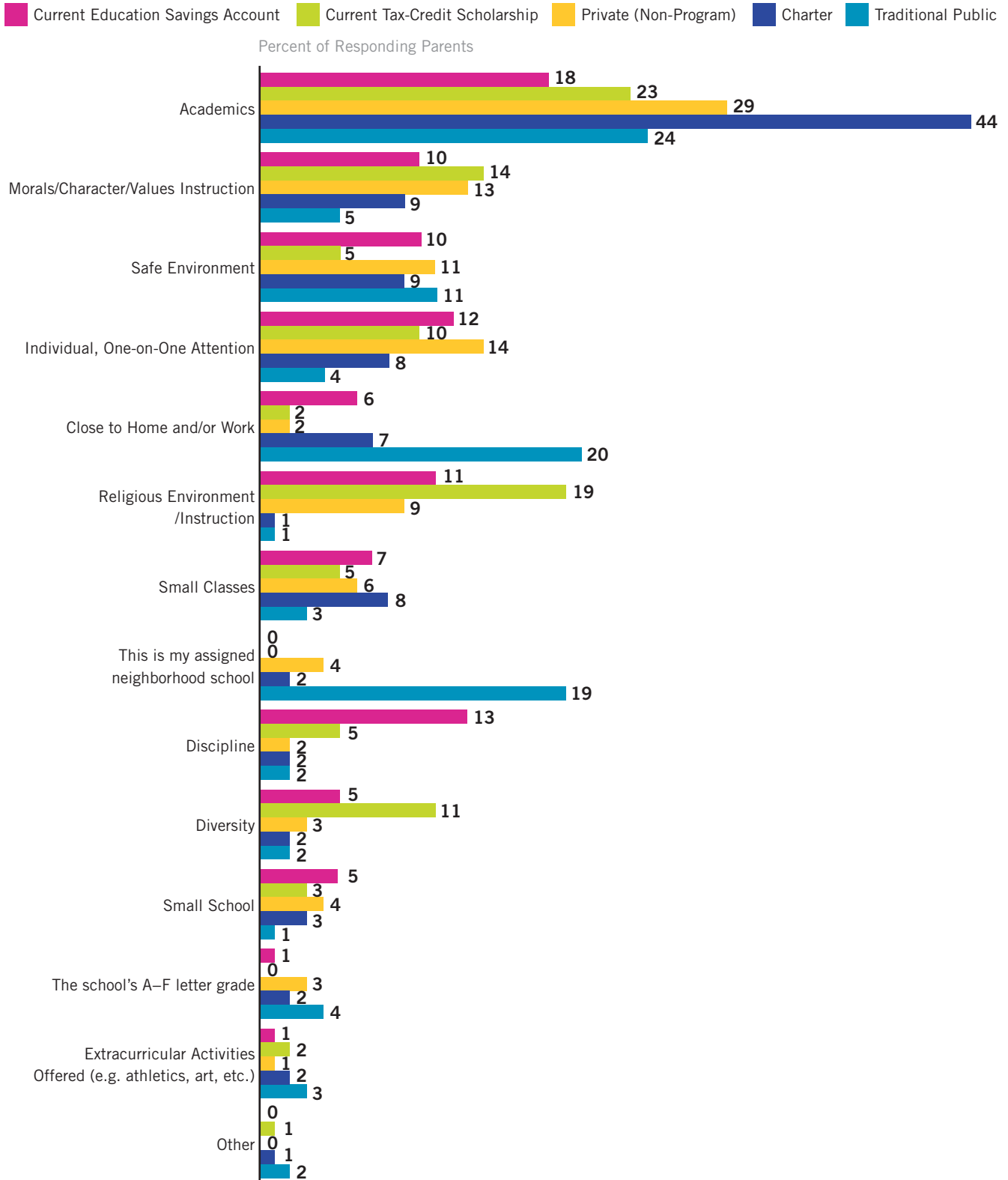
A substantial body of research has demonstrated a strong positive relationship between school climate and academic performance and other non-academic outcomes such as socio-emotional development.²¹ One expectation for school choice policies is that parents will be able to access schools that maintain a culture for learning that suits the needs of their child.²² On our survey, parents described their perceptions of five key aspects of the learning environment at their child’s school.²³ Generally, charter school and private non-program school parents give very high ratings to their child’s school for the components of school climate queried on our survey.

As shown in Figure 6, 83 percent of charter school parents and 75 percent of private non-program parents report that they are “confident that their child is safe at school”, compared to 73 percent of traditional public school and current ESA parents, and 64 percent of current TCS parents. In the area of school discipline, charter school parents, private school (non-program) parents, and current ESA parents give higher marks to their schools than traditional public-school parents. This finding based on parents’ perspectives is notable as private and charter schools have been criticized for using harsh disciplinary practices.²⁴

FIGURE 5

Arizona Parents' Most Influential Factors When Choosing a School

Academics is the most influential choosing factor for everyone.



number of parents responding (Q21 and Q51) = 139 Current Education Savings Account; 311 Current Tax-Credit Scholarship; 104 Private (Non-Program); 459 Charter; 2,065 Traditional Public

In reflecting on relationships in their child’s school, 84 percent of charter school parents say that staff make them feel welcome at school, a much higher percentage than that of traditional public, private (non-program), current ESA, or current TCS parents (74%, 73%, 62%, and 64%, respectively).

Seventy-six percent of charter school parents and 73 percent of private school (non-program) parents also say that they have a good relationship with their child’s teacher. For this question, traditional public school, current ESA, and current TCS parents are less likely to report having a good relationship with their child’s teacher (70%, 69%, and 65%, respectively).

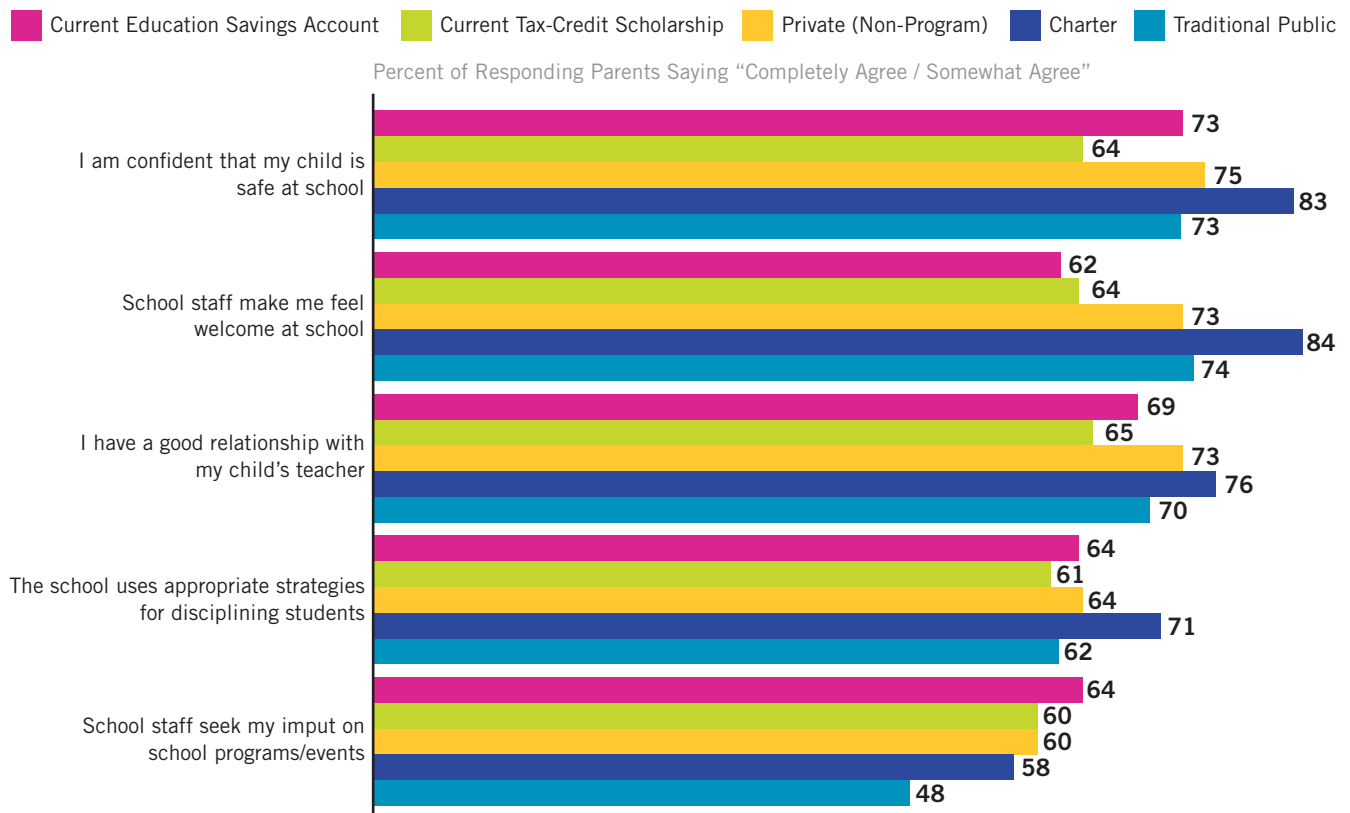
Parents also assessed the degree to which schools invited them to provide “input on school programs and events.” Only 48 percent of traditional public school parents completely/somewhat agreed that their child’s school seeks their “input on school programs and events.” For all other parents, however, this rate was higher, ranging from 58 to 64 percent, with current ESA parents being most likely to completely/somewhat agree that their child’s school seeks their “input on school programs and events.”

Generally, parents with children in charter and private schools gave comparatively high ratings of their schools on the five measures of school climate, indicating that schools of choice may offer parents greater access to school settings that meet their child’s educational needs.

FIGURE 6

School Climate

Charter school and private school parents give very high ratings to their child’s school across multiple dimensions of school climate.



number of parents responding (Q53) = 140 Current Education Savings Account; 304 Current Tax-Credit Scholarship; 107 Private (Non-Program); 479 Charter; 2,265 Traditional Public

Parental Involvement

Over the past three decades, scholarly studies have consistently shown the benefits of parental involvement on a host of academic, socioemotional, and developmental outcomes for children.²⁵ In theory, schools of choice are able to increase parent participation by leveraging their operational flexibility to address the needs of their school community and alleviate obstacles to parent participation.²⁶ On the survey, we sought to investigate this possibility by comparing rates of home- and school-based parental involvement. Figure 7 indicates participation rates in home-based parental involvement activities reported by the five groups of parents. We report the percentage of parents who indicated doing each activity “always” or “most of the time,” the two highest response categories.

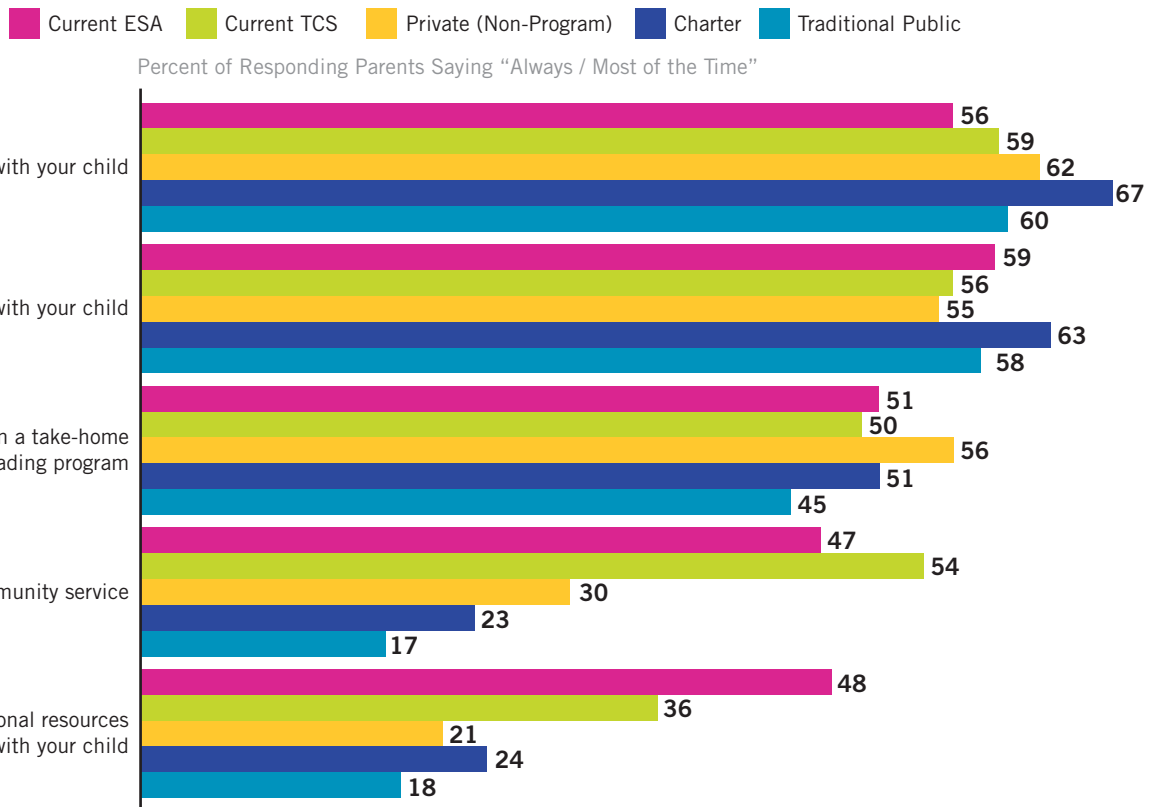
Parents across the five educational sectors generally “read” or “do math” with their child at similar rates, although charter school parents seem to engage in these practices more frequently than other parents. Traditional public school parents also report the lowest participation in school-initiated take-home reading programs relative to all other parents in the sample.

Private school parents, regardless of program participation, are much more likely to say they always participate in community service or do so most of the time compared to traditional public and charter school parents. Current ESA parents stand out for being much more likely to report using online educational resources “always” or “most of the time” at 48 percent compared to only 36 percent of current TCS, 21 percent of private (non-program), 24 percent of charter, and 18 percent of traditional public school parents. This difference was the largest observed for home-based parental involvement activities and could be a consequence

FIGURE 7

Home-Based Parental Involvement

Education savings account (ESA), and tax-credit scholarship (TCS) parents are the most involved in their child's education at home and are the most likely to participate in community service.



number of parents responding (Q24) = 142 Current ESA; 312 Current TCS; 117 Private (Non-Program); 497 Charter; 2,370 Traditional Public

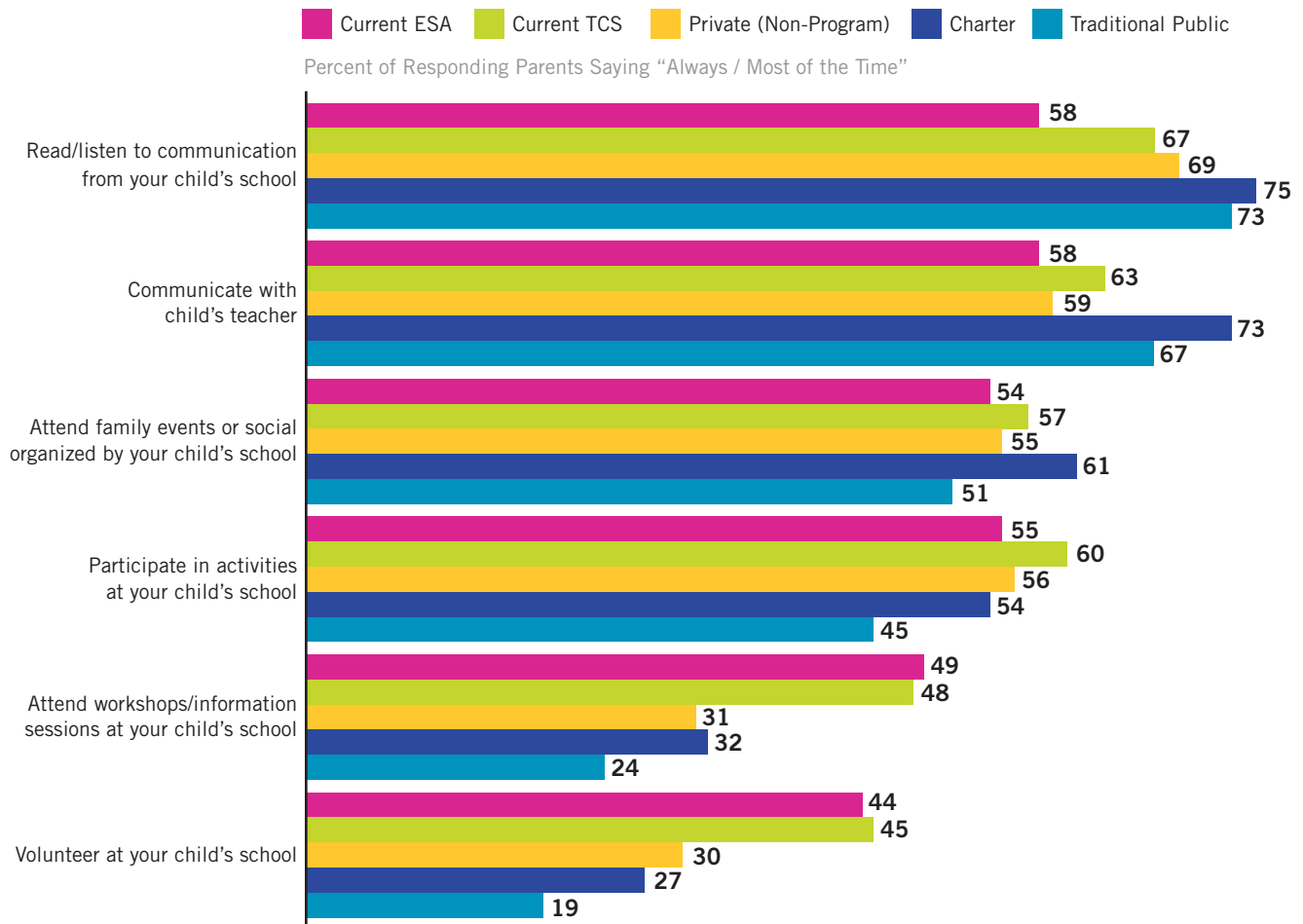
of “online resources” being an approved expense category under guidelines for Arizona’s ESAs. Virtual schooling may not be appropriate for all children, but it is unclear whether its use in an ESA context is unsuitable given that ESA users may concurrently use their funds for a combination of educational services. Future research is needed to determine exactly how ESA users make use of online resources and whether using online resources in combination with other educational services is beneficial for students.

Parents in different schools of choice largely indicate higher home-based parental involvement than traditional public school parents, but the extent to which schools are responsible for these results is difficult to ascertain. It may be that the most active

parents happen to be those who participate in school choice. School-based parental involvement, however, may offer a stronger indication of how different types of schools contribute to raising parental involvement since schools must play at least some role in enabling opportunities for school-based participation to occur.

Figure 8 compares reported rates of school-based parental involvement across the five groups of parents. As before, we report the percentage of parents who indicate that they participate “always” or “most of the time” in an activity. For each of the four school-based parent involvement activities, charter, private (non-program), current TCS, and current ESA parents report higher rates of participation than their traditional public

FIGURE 8 School-Based Parental Involvement
Education savings account (ESA), tax-credit scholarship (TCS), and charter school parents are the most involved in school-based activities with their child's school.



number of parents responding (Q24) = 142 Current ESA; 312 Current TCS; 117 Private (Non-Program); 497 Charter; 2,370 Traditional Public

school peers. For the two other home-school communication activities in Figure 8, charter schools stand out among the five groups of parents.

For attendance at workshops/information sessions and volunteering at school, the difference between current ESA and TCS parents and traditional public school parents is most pronounced. Current ESA and current TCS parents are approximately two times more likely to report attending workshops/information sessions and volunteering at school compared to traditional public school parents.

One of the hopes for schools of choice is that they will develop closer-knit school communities. Results from our survey provide support for this notion. For attendance at events/socials organized by school and participation in school activities, charter, current ESA, current TCS, and private (non-program) parents report greater participation than traditional public school parents. Between 54 percent and 61 percent of charter, current ESA, current TCS, and private (non-program) parents report doing these two activities “always” or “most of the time”, whereas 51 percent of traditional public school parents mention attendance at events/socials organized by school and 45 percent mention participation in school activities “always” or “most of the time.” Most strikingly, almost half of current ESA parents report attending workshops/

information sessions at school while roughly a quarter of traditional public school parents report doing so.

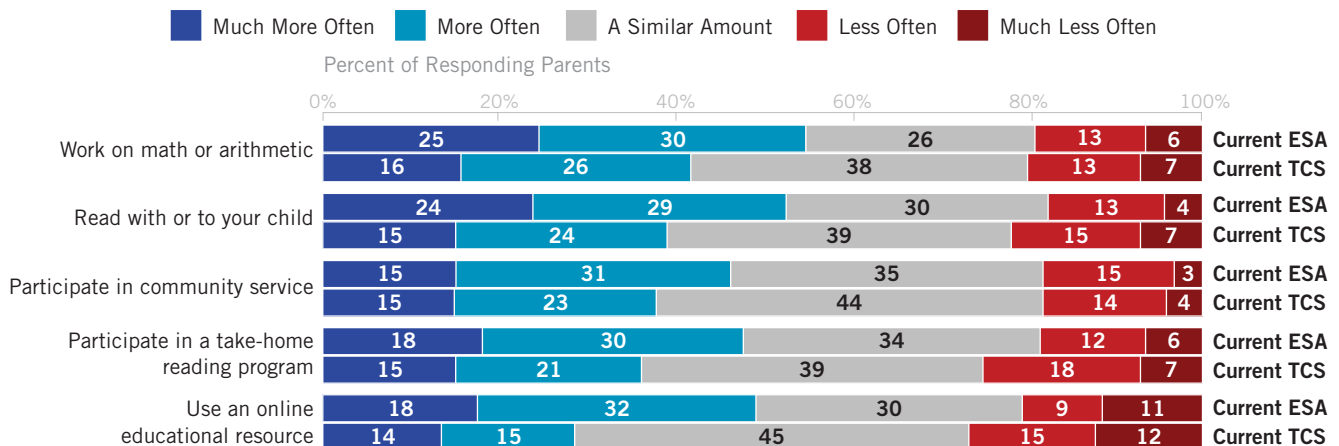
Overall trends depicted in Figure 8 seem to suggest that parents with children in charter schools and private schools (including ESA and TCS users) in Arizona report higher rates of school-based parental involvement than traditional public school parents.

How Do Education Savings Account and Tax-Credit Scholarship Programs Change Parents’ Sense of Involvement and Empowerment?

One of the stated goals of ESA and TCS programs is to provide greater opportunities for parents to select educational settings that best meet their child’s needs. This alignment between home and school preferences is expected to spur parent participation in children’s education and empower families.²⁷ On the survey, we specifically asked families who use an ESA or a TCS program to access private schools about their participation in their child’s education after enrolling in their respective programs. Based on parents’ perceptions, results show marked

FIGURE 9 Changes in Home-Based Parental Involvement for Education Savings Account (ESA) and Tax-Credit Scholarship (TCS) Parents

At least roughly half of ESA parents increase home-based parental involvement once their child is participating in the program.

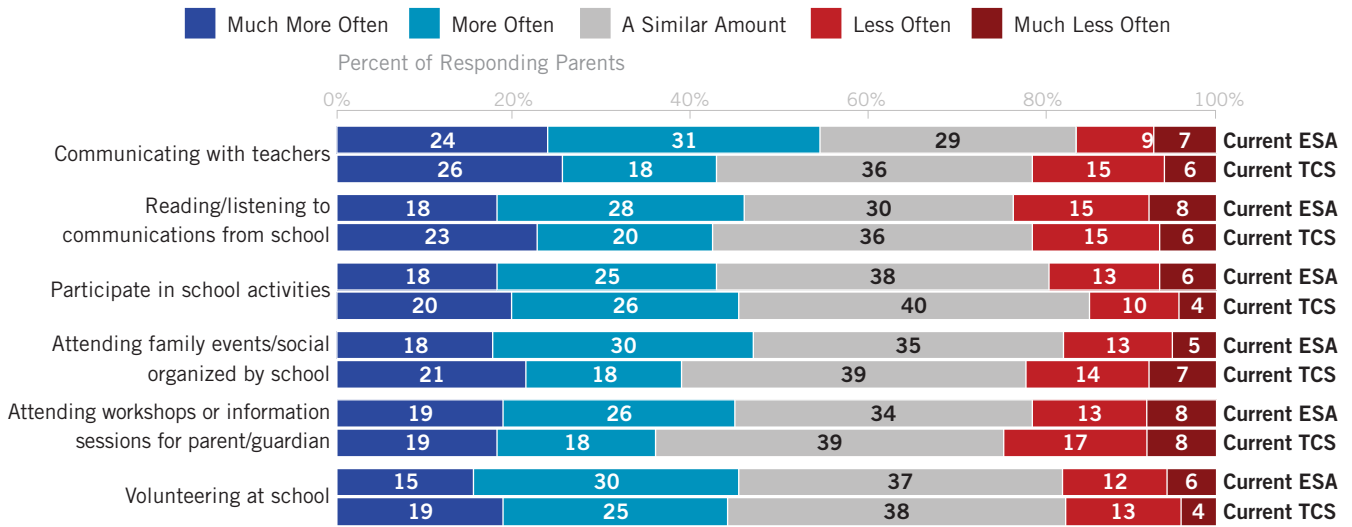


number of parents responding (Q25) = 142 Current ESA; 308 Current TCS

FIGURE 10

Changes in School-Based Parental Involvement for Education Savings Account (ESA) and Tax-Credit Scholarship (TCS) Parents

Around half of school choice parents communicate with teachers more often in their current school compared to their previous school.

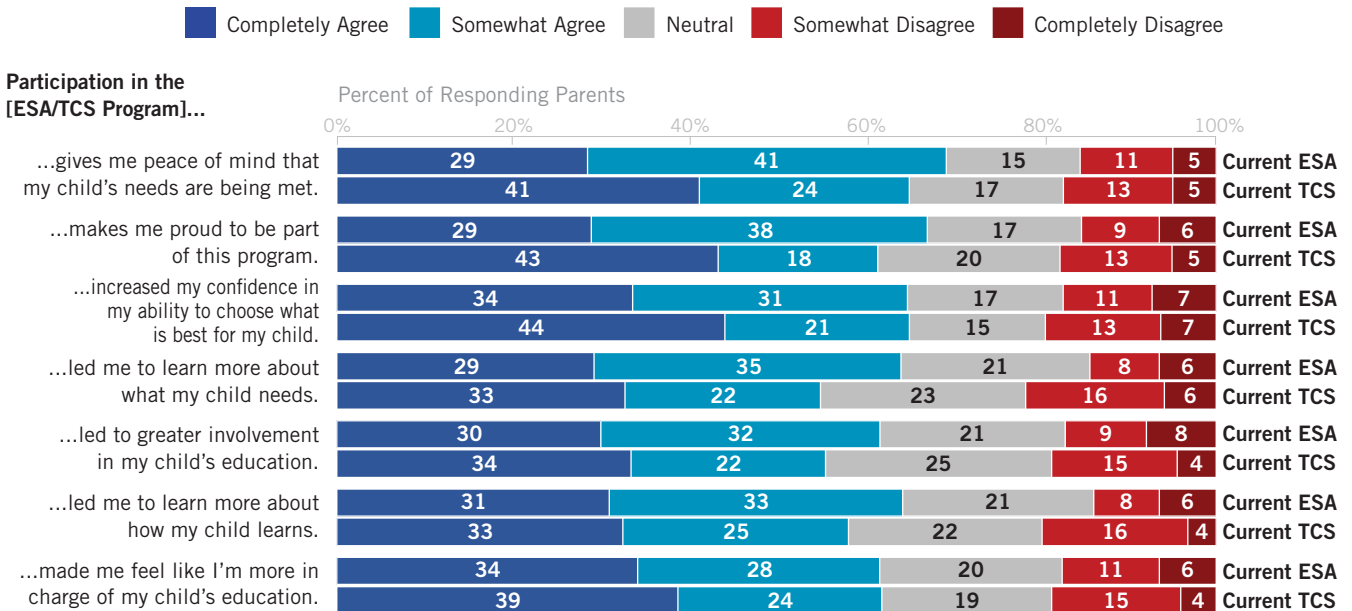


number of parents responding (Q25) = 142 Current ESA; 308 Current TCS

FIGURE 11

Parental Empowerment in the Education Savings Account (ESA) and Tax-Credit Scholarship (TCS) Programs

ESA parents are more empowered than TCS parents as a result of program participation.



number of parents responding (Q26) = 140 Current ESA; 306 Current TCS

growth in parent participation in their children’s academic lives at home and school for ESA and TCS families. As shown in Figure 9, more than half of current ESA parents and approximately 40 percent of current TCS parents read and do math with their children “much more often” or “more often” than they did before enrolling in the choice programs. Only 18 percent to 22 percent of current ESA and current TCS parents say that they read and do math with their children “less often” or “much less often” after enrolling in these two programs.

For all activities, a higher proportion of current ESA parents than current TCS parents indicate that they do each activity “much more often” or “more often” since enrolling their child in the program, with the exception of participating in school activities.

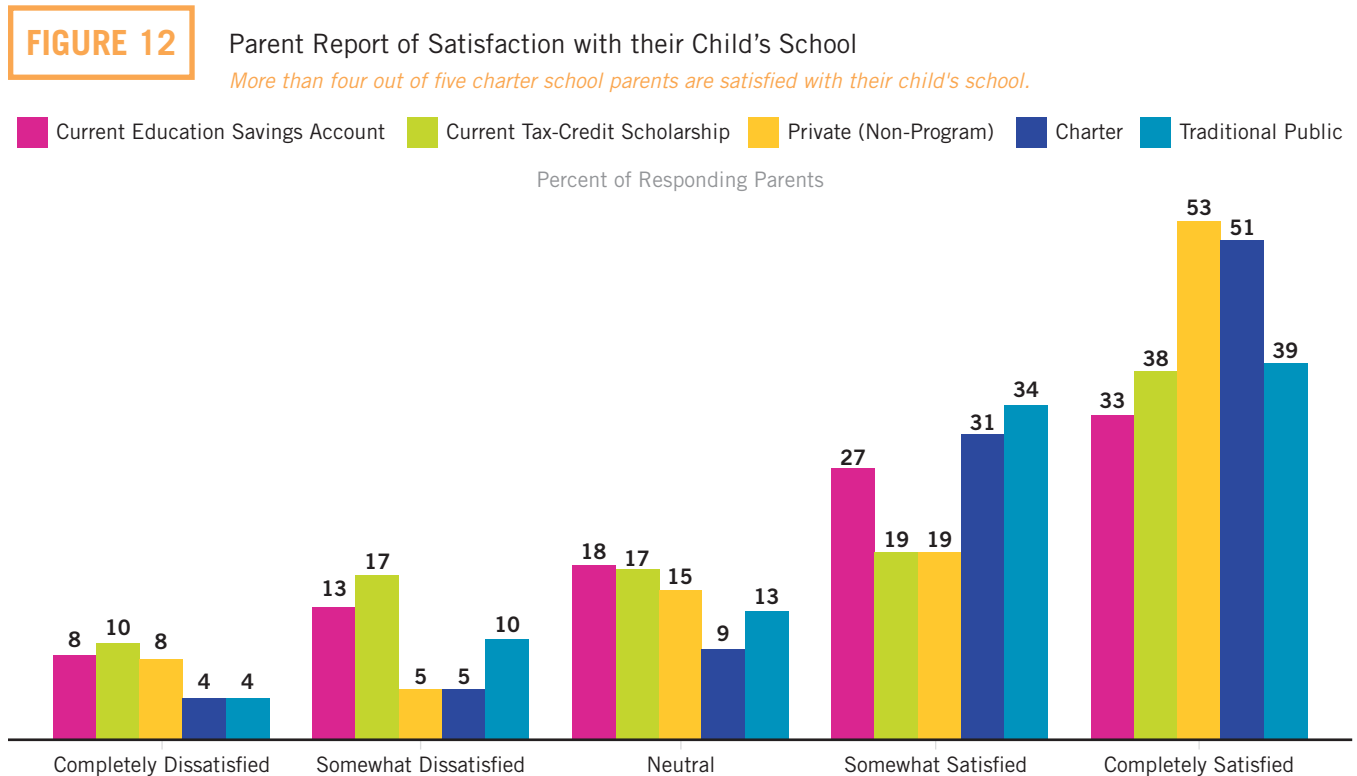
Parents currently using ESA and TCS programs were also asked a series of questions to determine if participating in these programs had altered their sense of empowerment. Parents indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that

participation in an ESA or TCS program made them feel more in charge of their child’s education. On this item, a little over 60 percent of current TCS and ESA parents reported feeling more in charge of their child’s education while less than one-fifth of TCS users (19%) and ESA users (18%) reported not feeling in charge of their child’s education.

Taken together, these questions examining changes in parental involvement and empowerment indicate that ESA and TCS programs may contribute to greater parental involvement and empowerment.

Parental Satisfaction

A 2017 review of the research on parent satisfaction with vouchers, tax-credit scholarships, and education savings account programs showed that parents using these school choice programs expressed higher levels of satisfaction than traditional public school parents.²⁸ Figure 12 illustrates parent satisfaction ratings in Arizona among parents with children in traditional public,



number of parents responding (Q19 and Q47) = 142 Current Education Savings Account; 312 Current Tax-Credit Scholarship; 112 Private (Non-Program); 484 Charter; 2,302 Traditional Public

charter, and private schools (i.e. ESA, TCS, and non-program users). Eighty-two percent of charter school parents report being “somewhat or completely satisfied” with their child’s school, whereas just less than three-quarters of traditional public school parents (73%) and private school (non-program) parents (72%) share the same sentiment. Sixty-one percent of current ESA parents report being satisfied with their school, which was slightly higher than the 56 percent of current TCS parents who feel similarly. The more favorable views of the learning environment in charter schools might have led to their higher satisfaction ratings.

CONCLUSION

In this report, we present results from a large survey of 3,577 parents with children in K–12 schools in Arizona. Our analyses compare perceptions of schools among traditional public, charter, and three types of current private school (i.e. education savings account, tax-credit scholarship, and non-program) parents. In general, parents accessing charter schools gave the most favorable ratings of their schools on most indicators. Private school parents also rated their schools more favorably than traditional public schools on many but not all aspects.

For most home- and school-based parental involvement activities, charter, current ESA, current TCS, and private (non-program) parents report greater involvement than traditional public school parents do. School choice policies in Arizona thus appear to be meeting expectations for parental involvement. Comparatively high rates of school-based parental involvement, such as volunteering in school, attending information sessions, and attending socials at school, suggest that schools of choice are working to enable greater parental involvement. This approach to families may also help to strengthen bonds in the broader school community in ways that help to meet needs for student wellbeing.

Additionally, charter schools received the highest ratings on four of five measures of school climate with charter school parents providing higher ratings than traditional public, private (non-program), current ESA, and current TCS parents on school safety, parent-teacher relationships, appropriateness of disciplinary strategies, and assessments of how welcoming the school staff are. These results may provide insight into why charter schools have thrived in Arizona. Current ESA parents also gave the highest ratings on a school’s willingness to seek parental input on school programs and events.

When considering patterns for current ESA and current TCS parents, we found that, in some instances, these two groups of parents value different aspects of schooling compared to traditional public and charter school parents. Most notably, current ESA and current TCS families placed greater value on instilling religious and moral value while other parents indicated that they place more value on job preparation. It is also worth reiterating that a large percentage of ESA parents report that their children attend private schools for students with special needs, and consequently, this subgroup of parents may have more immediate physical and socioemotional priorities for their children that help to explain the trends observed on our survey.

In considering the overall patterns from our survey, parent reports on school climate, parental involvement, and beliefs about the purposes of education largely suggest that school choice policies initiated in Arizona serve a wide range of parent preferences and student needs. Any one metric for evaluating schools in a diverse educational choice system like the one in Arizona is likely to provide an incomplete assessment of what school choice does for families. Our parent survey contributes to a more complete understanding of Arizona’s diverse educational sector and indicates that schools of choice in the state may be offering families important educational options.

APPENDIX 1

Survey Project and Profile

Title: 2018 Survey of Arizona School Parents

Survey Sponsor: The Seminar Network

Survey Developer: EdChoice

Survey Data Collection

& Quality Control: Hanover Research

Interview Dates: June 14 to July 12, 2018

Interview Method: Web

Interview Length: 12.3 minutes (median)

Language(s): English only

Sampling Method: Phase I: panel
Phase II: snowball sample of school tuition organization (STO) families

Population Sample: Statewide sample of school parents in Arizona

Sample Size: Current Education Savings Account Parents, N = 142 (partial and complete)
Current Tax-Credit Scholarship Parents, N = 312 (partial and complete)
Private School (Non-Program) Parents, N = 117 (partial and complete)
Charter School Parents, N = 497 (partial and complete)
Traditional Public School Parents, N = 2,370 (partial and complete)

Margin of Error: Current Education Savings Account Parents = $\pm 8.11\%$
Current Tax-Credit Scholarship Parents = $\pm 5.51\%$
Private School (Non-Program) Parents = $\pm 9.03\%$
Charter School Parents = $\pm 4.39\%$
Traditional Public School Parents = $\pm 2.01\%$

Response Rate: Phase I = 9.1%
Phase II = N/A (snowball sample)

Weighting? No

Oversampling? No

APPENDIX 2

Sample Size and Margin of Error by Respondent Type

TABLE 2.1 Sample Size and Margin of Error by Respondent Type

School Type	Population Size	Sample Size	% of Population	Margin of Error
Public School	941,686	2,370	0.25%	2.01%
Charter School	185,889	497	0.27%	4.39%
Private (Non-Program)	17,477	117	0.67%	9.03%
Current Education Savings Account (ESA) Program	5,091	226	4.44%	8.11%
Current Tax-Credit Scholarship (TCS) Program(s)	23,648	447	1.89%	5.51%

Sources: Content Management System – Arizona Department of Education, “October 1, 2016 Enrollment; County by Grade,” retrieved from <https://cms.azed.gov/home/GetDocumentFile?id=59cd75743217e112f814dbce>; Arizona Charter Schools Association, “Understanding Public Charter Schools,” accessed December 17, 2018, retrieved from <https://azcharters.org/about-charter-schools/#lightbox/2>; National Center for Education Statistics, “Table 15. Number of Private Schools, Students, Full-time Equivalent (FTE) Teachers, and 2014-15 High School Graduates, by State: United States, 2015-16,” retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/pss/tables/TABLE15fl.asp>; EdChoice, “Arizona – Empowerment Scholarship Accounts,” accessed December 17, 2018, retrieved from <https://www.ed-choice.org/school-choice/programs/arizona-empowerment-scholarship-accounts>; Arizona Department of Revenue, School Tuition Organization Income Tax Credits in Arizona Summary of Activity: FY 2015/2016, retrieved from https://azdor.gov/sites/default/files/media/REPORTS_CRED-ITS_2017_fy2016-private-school-tuition-org-credit-report.pdf

Notes: In the table above, only current program users are included in the calculations of sample size. Respondent Groups were defined as follows:

Traditional Public School respondents: Selected “None of my children have ever used one of Arizona’s educational choice programs” in Q6, and “Public district (neighborhood) school” in Q8

Public Charter School respondents: Selected “None of my children have ever used one of Arizona’s educational choice programs” in Q6, and “Public charter school” in Q8

Current ESA respondents: Selected “Empowerment Scholarship Accounts (ESA) Program”, or both “Empowerment Scholarship Accounts (ESA) Program” and “School Tuition Organization (STO) scholarship programs – includes the Original Individual Income Tax Credit Scholarship Program, the Low-Income Corporate Income Tax Credit Scholarship Program, the Lexie’s Law for Disabled and Displaced Students Tax Credit Scholarship Program, and the “Switcher” (Overflow) Individual Income Tax Credit Scholarship Program” in Q7 and selected “Yes” in Q13

Current Tax-Credit Scholarship respondents: Selected only “School Tuition Organization (STO) scholarship programs – includes the Original Individual Income Tax Credit Scholarship Program, the Low-Income Corporate Income Tax Credit Scholarship Program, the Lexie’s Law for Disabled and Displaced Students Tax Credit Scholarship Program, and the “Switcher” (Overflow) Individual Income Tax Credit Scholarship Program” in Q7 and selected “Yes” in Q13

Former ESA respondents: Selected “Empowerment Scholarship Accounts (ESA) Program”, or both “Empowerment Scholarship Accounts (ESA) Program” and “School Tuition Organization (STO) scholarship programs – includes the Original Individual Income Tax Credit Scholarship Program, the Low-Income Corporate Income Tax Credit Scholarship Program, the Lexie’s Law for Disabled and Displaced Students Tax Credit Scholarship Program, and the “Switcher” (Overflow) Individual Income Tax Credit Scholarship Program” in Q7 and selected “No” in Q13

Former Tax-Credit Scholarship respondents: Selected only “School Tuition Organization (STO) scholarship programs – includes the Original Individual Income Tax Credit Scholarship Program, the Low-Income Corporate Income Tax Credit Scholarship Program, the Lexie’s Law for Disabled and Displaced Students Tax Credit Scholarship Program, and the “Switcher” (Overflow) Individual Income Tax Credit Scholarship Program” in Q7 and selected “No” in Q13

Non-Program Private School respondents: Selected “None of my children have ever used one of Arizona’s educational choice programs” in Q6, and also selected at least one of the following from Q8: “non-Catholic, Christian private school,” “Catholic private school,” “Other religious private school,” or “Nonreligious private school”

Question text for reference:

Q6 - Have any of your children ever used one of Arizona’s educational choice programs – i.e. an education savings account (ESA), or a school tuition organization (STO) scholarship at any time from Kindergarten through High School? Please select all that apply.

Q7 - Has your oldest child in elementary, middle, or high school ever used one of Arizona’s educational choice programs – i.e. an education savings account (ESA), or a school tuition organization (STO) scholarship at any time from Kindergarten through High School? Please select all that apply.

Q8 - Please indicate the type of school that your oldest child in elementary, middle, or high school currently attends or most recently attended.

Q13 - Is your oldest child in elementary, middle, or high school still participating in the [Program Type]?

APPENDIX 3

Research Methods

This section provides a detailed breakdown of research methods used to generate the results featured in this report.

Survey Design

For this report on educational choice in Arizona, parent/guardians with children in elementary, middle, or high schools were surveyed by Hanover Research Group in the summer of 2018. Prior to releasing the survey, EdChoice researchers and researchers at the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard University developed the survey questionnaire during the spring of 2018. On the survey, parents/guardians were asked to provide information on their school district of residence, child’s current and previous schools of attendance, child’s school commute, participation in educational savings account or tax-credit scholarship programs, and demographic information on highest education level, household size, annual income, race/ethnicity, and religious tradition.

Topical areas of the survey questionnaire also inquired about factors influencing parent/guardians’ school choice decisions, how they gather information on schools, what they believe the purposes of education are, how involved they are in the child’s education, how well their child’s school enables their involvement, the learning atmosphere (i.e. school climate) at their child’s current school, and level of satisfaction with their child’s current school. In the case that a parent/guardian responding to the survey had more than one child, the respondent was asked to provide information for their oldest child currently in elementary, middle, or high school. Responses to the survey were cleaned and analyzed in July of 2018 in STATA. Unless otherwise noted, all data are based on responses provided for the oldest child of the parent/guardian currently attending elementary, middle, or high school in Arizona.

TABLE 3.1 Survey Sample

School Type	Sample (#)	Population (#)
Public Schools		
Public School Districts	181	216
Neighborhood Public School	1,003	1,774
Charter School	302	560
Race		
White	2,169	438,025
Black	211	60,126
Hispanic	800	511,608
Other / Multi- Race	497	120,733
Race Unreported	201	-
Median Household Income	\$45,500*	\$51,340

*Forty-three percent of the sample indicated income between \$0-45,500.

Notes: For the sample, demographic data refer to parent/guardians while demographic information on the population are based on student demographic characteristics. Population data were derived from 2016-2017 data.

NOTES

1. Robert Maranto, Scott Milliman, Frederick Hess, and April Gresham (Eds.), (2001), *School Choice in the Real World: Lessons from Arizona Charter Schools*, retrieved from <https://books.google.com/books?id=LMkQAQAAAJ>
2. Martin F. Lueken (2018), The Fiscal Effects of Tax-Credit Scholarship Programs in the United States, *Journal of School Choice*, 12(2), pp. 181–215, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15582159.2018.1447725>; Richard J. Murnane and Sean F. Reardon (2018), Long-Term Trends in Private School Enrollments by Family Income, *AERA Open*, 4(1), pp. 1–24, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/2332858417751355>
3. Sandra Vergari (1999), Charter Schools: A Primer on the Issues, *Education and Urban Society*, 31(4), 389–405, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0013124599031004002>
4. National Center for Education Statistics (2017), Table 216.90. Public Elementary and Secondary Charter Schools and Enrollment, by State: Selected Years, 2000-01 through 2015-16 [web page], last modified August 2017, retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_216.90.asp
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6. EdChoice (2018), Arizona – Empowerment Scholarship Accounts [web page], accessed September 9, 2018, retrieved from <https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/programs/arizona-empowerment-scholarship-accounts>; EdChoice (2018), What is an Education Savings Account? [web page], accessed September 6, 2018, retrieved from <https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/types-of-school-choice/education-savings-account>
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8. Arizona State Senate (2016), *Empowerment Scholarship Accounts* (Research Brief), retrieved from <https://www.azleg.gov/briefs/senate/empowerment%20scholarship%20accounts.pdf>
9. Daniel Hamlin and Paul E. Peterson (2018), Have States Maintained High Expectations for Student Performance? An Analysis of 2017 State Proficiency Standards, *Education Next*, 18(4), pp. 42–49, https://www.educationnext.org/files/ednext_xviii_4_hamlin_peterson.pdf
10. The Nation's Report Card (n.d.) Data Tools – State Profiles: Arizona (AZ) [web page], accessed September 6, 2018, retrieved from <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/profiles/stateprofile/overview/AZ>
11. Martin R. West, Matthew A. Kraft, Amy S. Finn, Rebecca E. Martin, Angela L. Duckworth, Christopher F. O. Gabrieli, and John D. E. Gabrieli (2016), Promise and Paradox: Measuring Students' Non-Cognitive Skills and the Impact of Schooling, *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 38(1), pp. 148–170, <https://dx.doi.org/10.3102/0162373715597298>
12. Samuel Barrows, Albert Cheng, Paul E. Peterson, and Martin R. West (2019), Do Charters Pose a Threat to Private Schools? Evidence from Nationally Representative Surveys of U.S. Parents, *Journal of School Choice*, 13(1) pp. 10–32, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15582159.2018.1547589>; Daniel Hamlin (2017), Parental Involvement in High Choice Deindustrialized Cities: A Comparison of Charter and Public Schools in Detroit, *Urban Education*, advance online publication, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0042085917697201>
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14. Of these dropped responses, 797 were dropped for being disqualified, 329 were dropped for providing too few responses, and 69 were dropped for providing specious responses. Note that the sample sizes for each phase of solicitation and school type reflect the final, cleaned data, with all errant responses dropped.
15. National Center for Education Statistics, "Table 101.40. Estimated Total and School-age Resident Populations, by State: Selected Years, 1970 through 2015," accessed December 14, 2018, retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_101.40.asp. This number represents 2015 data, the latest year for which data is available for the tax-credit scholarship programs. However, recent trends indicate the school age population has been growing at a slowing rate, staying close to flat, in recent years. Thus, the school age population for the 2016-17 and 2017-18 school years is unlikely to differ from this number by much more than 1,000. Such a relatively small difference in population size would have no impact on the margin of error.

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The authors take responsibility for any errors, misrepresentations or omissions in this publication.

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