



UNDERSTANDING ESAs

What is the Student First Act?

The Student First Act makes state education funding available for 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?

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 (2 0 2 3 - 2 4)	YEAR 2 (2 0 2 4 - 2 5)	YEAR 3 (2 0 2 5 - 2 6)
All kindergarten students	All kindergarten students	All K-12 students in Iowa regardless of income
All public school students	All public school students	
Private school students at or below 300% FPL	Private school students at or below 400% FPL	

How do I apply for ESA funds?

Details, including the application start date, will be provided soon. Applications will be due on June 30, 2023, for the 2023-2024 school year. Applications are valid for one year; a family must apply annually to remain eligible for the program. Families interested in more information should visit the [Iowa Department of Education website](https://educateiowa.gov) and sign up to receive updates. (<https://educateiowa.gov/pk-12/education-savings-accounts>) **It is important to note that this application will be in addition to the TADS application required for the Diocese of Sioux City Scholarship Program.** We strongly suggest families complete both applications to take advantage of all assistance available to them.

When will my child receive ESA funds?

The process and timeframe for the distribution of ESA funds are still being determined. Families interested in more information should 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 students in grades K-8 at parochial schools will be guaranteed enrollment if registered by their school's deadline according to the school enrollment process. For all other students, the schools will prioritize enrollment according to the following guidelines:

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

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.

We will continue to work with parents, the Area Education Agency (AEA) and our local public school partners to meet the academic and behavioral needs of students with Individual Education Plans (IEP)

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.

Are Catholic Schools accredited?

All 16 Catholic schools in the Diocese of Sioux City 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.

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

Our mission is to serve all families who desire a Catholic education. Our schools reflect the population we serve and welcome all backgrounds.

What about the Diocese of Sioux City Scholarship Program and other tuition assistance?

The new education savings accounts will not affect eligibility for tuition assistance provided to families through the Diocese of Sioux City Scholarship Program, including MLTF - Monsignor Lafferty Tuition Foundation. 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. Any family eligible for tuition assistance is encouraged to apply.

All families who meet the income guidelines below will need to apply for tuition assistance as the process and timeframe for the distribution of ESA funds are still being determined.

2023 Income Eligibility Guidelines	
(FPL per Dept of HHS)	
Household size	ESA income levels
1	\$43,740
2	\$59,160
3	\$74,580
4	\$90,000
5	\$105,420
6	\$120,840
7	\$136,260
8	\$151,680
for each additional person add:	\$15,420

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 the completion of the private school program. Account balances can also be used to help cover the cost of tuition at a Catholic high school in our diocese if one is available nearby.

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. This legislation supports parental choice, not institutions.

Why does 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, St. 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 these additional ministries and the shared mission of our parishes and schools. 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.