



# Understanding the Education Scholarship Account (ESA)

Questions and Answers



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## The Education Scholarship Account (ESA)

The Mississippi Education Scholarship was enacted in 2015 and provides an opportunity for parents of children with disabilities to receive money to help defray the cost of private school tuition or other specific allowable expenses to educate their child. The ESA program was created by the Equal Opportunity for Students with Special Needs Act (Mississippi Code Ann. §37-181-1 et. Seq). The program is being administered by the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE), Office of Special Education (OSE).

## Who is eligible?

- Children who reside in Mississippi, and
- Children who have an active Individualized Education Program (IEP) within three (3) years from the date of application. An active IEP is an IEP developed by a public school district where the student was enrolled and received special education or related services outlined in the IEP.
- It is important to note that the local school district is responsible for locating, identifying, and evaluating (including reevaluating) children who attend eligible schools within the district.

## Parents must sign an agreement to abide by the following responsibilities:

- Provide an organized, appropriate educational program with measurable annual goals and provide an education for the child in at least the subjects of reading, grammar, mathematics, social studies and science;
- Cooperate with the home school district to determine and document the participating child's disability and ongoing eligibility for special education and related services at least once every three (3) years after initial enrollment in the program;
- Not enroll the participating child in a public school and to acknowledge that the eligible school has provided clear notice that the child has no individual entitlement to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) from the home school district, including special education and related services, for as long as the child is participating in the ESA program;
- Not file for the participating child a certificate of enrollment indicating participation in a home instruction program under §37-13-19, Mississippi Code of 1972;
- Not participate in the Mississippi Dyslexia Therapy Scholarship for Students with Dyslexia Program or the Mississippi Speech-Language Therapy Scholarship for Students with Speech-Language Impairments Program while participating in the ESA program;

- Notify the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) immediately upon a change in status that causes one or more of the above items to no longer be met; and share the pre- and post-assessments administered by the school the student is attending with the OSE by June of each awarded year.

### **How are students selected for the ESA?**

- Once an application is submitted, the application and required documentation will be reviewed within 21 business days to determine student eligibility.
- Incomplete applications will not be processed, and parents will be notified of what is needed to complete the application. Applications are date stamped upon receipt. Applications that are determined eligible, will be awarded on a first-come, first-served basis. The remaining applications after all awards are filled will be placed on a waiting list, if determined eligible.
- Once a student is awarded an ESA, an award packet will be mailed to the parent/guardian requesting verification of student enrollment at an eligible school, requesting the parent/guardian to complete steps to set up an account to receive reimbursements, and requesting the submission of a pre-assessment. Upon receipt of information and final steps being completed, the student award will be finalized. The student will be enrolled in the program as long as they remain eligible, until the participating student returns to a public school, completes high school, completes the school year in which the student reaches the age of twenty-one (21), or does not have eligibility verified by a parent every three (3) years after initial enrollment in the ESA program.

### **What does it mean to be placed on a waitlist?**

A waitlist will be maintained of eligible applicants that have not yet been awarded due to availability of funds. As applications are received, the OSE will proceed with the review of student eligibility and place additional eligible students on the wait list. Parents will be notified that their child is eligible, but not yet awarded. As funds become available, ESAs will be awarded in chronological order from the waitlist.

### **When is the best time to apply for the ESA?**

To ensure the award notification is received prior to the start of the school year, the best time to submit the application is from December through May. This will allow time to get all documentation submitted and verified. However, applications are accepted throughout the school year.

### **How much is the scholarship?**

The amount is calculated each spring and may vary based on the availability of funds. For the 2023-2024 school year, the maximum reimbursement is \$7,089.00.



## How do I apply for the ESA?

Applications are available through your local public school and the Mississippi Department of Education website: [www.mdek12.org/OSE/ESA](http://www.mdek12.org/OSE/ESA). Applications will be accepted via United States Postal Service and the online portal (currently under development). Applications will only be accepted via United States Postal Service (USPS). Applications must be complete on submission with all necessary documents. Any incomplete submissions will not be processed.

## What can be reimbursed through the ESA?

- Tuition and/or academic fees from an eligible school: fees in addition to tuition are allowable only if they directly impact the educational needs of the student.
- Textbooks related to academic coursework.
- Payment to a tutor. Documentation must be provided that verifies the tutor is certified or licensed by a state, regional or national certification, licensing or accreditation (the student **cannot** be home schooled or enrolled in a public school and receive these funds).
- Payment for purchase of curriculum, including any supplemental materials required by the curriculum.
- Fees for nationally standardized norm-referenced achievement tests, including alternate assessments; Advanced Placement exams or similar courses; any exams related to college/university admission.
- Educational services or therapies from a licensed or certified practitioner or provider, including licensed or certified paraprofessionals or educational aides (the student **cannot** be home schooled or enrolled in a public school and receive ESA funds).
- Tuition and fees related to dual enrollment at a postsecondary institution. These expenses are allowable for a **high school student** taking classes at a post-secondary institution (community college, college or university accredited by a state, regional or national accrediting organization), but they are not allowable for a student who has graduated from high school and is enrolled at a post-secondary institution.
- Textbooks related to dual enrollment academic classwork at a post-secondary institution.
- No more than \$50 in annual consumable school supplies necessary for educational services, therapies, daily classroom activities and tutoring.
- Computer hardware and software and other technological devices if an eligible school, licensed and professional tutor; licensed or certified educational service practitioner or provider; or licensed medical professional verifies in writing that these items are essential for the student to meet annual, measurable educational and academic goals, or goals within the scope of the eligible student's IEP. Qualifying expenses for computer hardware and software include only those expenses incurred within the awarded year. Once a student is no longer

participating in the program, all computer hardware and technology devices must be donated to the public school or library.

### **How will I receive ESA funds?**

Upon MDE, OSE's final determination of the award, parents will be sent a letter requesting additional information that must be completed and submitted in order to finalize the student's account for reimbursement of expenses. Funds will be paid quarterly to the parent OR to an educational service provider (if approved by the parent) on a reimbursement basis. The parent must submit a reimbursement request with proper documentation of itemized expenses incurred. Parents who pay fees in full at the beginning of the school year will receive even distributions over the four quarters. No lump sum reimbursements are permissible.

### **Have further questions?**

Additional information on the ESA program can be found at [www.mdek12.org/OSE/ESA](http://www.mdek12.org/OSE/ESA) or by calling the MDE, OSE at (601) 359-3498.

