NEPC Review: Child Safety Accounts: Protecting Our Children Through Parental Freedom (Heartland Institute, November 2019)

Reviewed by:

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Executive Summary

A recent report from the Heartland Institute argues for a Child Safety Accounts (CSA) program that makes it easier for parents with a child who feels unsafe in school to transfer to another school (be it public, private, magnet, charter, homeschool, etc.). The CSA program is a version of the education savings account programs that began in Arizona in 2011. The report contains three primary findings and conclusions:

1. Students can and do encounter various forms of abuse throughout their school trajectory, including violent assaults, bullying, and sexual abuse.
2. CSAs can be used to alleviate students' suffering from various forms of abuse in school.
3. CSAs empower parents to make the best decisions for their children.

The report does not explain how the new policy will be funded, nor does it provide criteria that must be met to access the CSA. Because eligibility appears to rest on a mere claim of safety concerns, the proposed policy could immensely change the landscape of school funding and complicate school politics by removing students from public schools. The report also lacks any research to substantiate its policy recommendations. While the report's discussion about school bullying and other forms of abuse is timely, it fails to provide a clear set of steps to bring about change, opting instead to simply advocate for this form of taxpayer-funded vouchers. Accordingly, it is of little use to policymakers concerned about either school safety or school choice.

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I. Introduction

School safety is a hot topic of debate, drawing commentary from educators, parents, political leaders, and students themselves. Into this broader discussion steps a recent report, *Child Safety Accounts: Protecting Our Children through Parental Freedom*,[1] published by The Heartland Institute at the Center for Educational Opportunities. Written by Vicki Alger and Timothy Benson, the report proposes a policy that would enable parents to transfer their children out of their current public school, in order to escape unsafe learning environments.

The report suggests that states implement Child Safety Accounts (CSAs) that would allow parents to immediately have their child moved to a safe school, including private schools, when the parents have "reasonable apprehension" for their child's safety (p. 3). This is similar to the Education Savings Account (ESA) program that other states such as Arizona and Florida have previously adopted in different forms, and that raise concerns about significant drawbacks and limitations.[2] To date, Florida, through its Hope Scholarship program initiated in 2018, is the first and only state that has adopted this specific type of child-safety-focused ESA program.

This review briefly summarizes the report and then provides an analysis of the report's argument and conclusions. The review also considers several questions that should be asked in order for readers to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the policy at hand, including funding and consideration of the intended and unintended consequences. We conclude with questions and implications for the proposed policy in order to help students who face various forms of abuse and violence during their school trajectory.

Although the Heartland Institute is focused on advocating for school choice, rather than school safety, and although this report seems designed to play on our legitimate sympathies

for the impacted students, this review approaches the report and its proposal as a sincere attempt to wrestle with a serious problem. Children facing bullying or safety concerns deserve honest consideration of their needs and of possible supports.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report contains three primary findings and conclusions:

1. Students encounter various forms of abuse throughout their school years, such as violent assaults, bullying, and sexual abuse.

   The report details the various forms of danger children might face in schools, including bullying, assaults, and harassment. The most common form of violence that most children face is bullying.[3] The report argues that bullying makes children feel unsafe and hinders academic performance. It also presents student-student and student-teacher sexual harassment statistics, noting that student-student harassment is far more common. Additionally, it notes statistics showing that suicide among students is increasing while gang prevalence is declining. School fighting is also in decline, according to the report.[4] The report briefly mentions school shootings and the lack of data to back up claims of rising rates of school shootings. It details the problems and abuse that students with special needs often face, including higher rates of discipline[5] and bullying. And it touches on the bullying that students with food allergies face.

2. Child Safety Accounts can be used to alleviate students' suffering from various forms of abuse in school.

   The report outlines how the CSA policy might work. Parents would be able to access funds set aside in the state budget, if they have "reasonable apprehension" that their children are in danger. The funds could only be accessed by parents through a state-sponsored debit card, matching the approach used in other ESA policies. Families would have the option of transferring their child(ren) to any school of their choice, including schools "within or beyond their resident government [sic] school districts—including public district, charter, and virtual schools—as well as private and parochial schools."[6] Funds in the accounts could be rolled over from year to year.

   The CSAs, funded by the state, may end up providing sufficient funding for a given family. Other families may need additional sources of funding, so the report suggests that the state allow parents to "top off" funding by accessing income tax credits and/or deductions for education expenses like tuition and books. The report also suggests that states add a tax-credit "scholarship" component to the CSA program. This would allow individuals and corporations to deduct donations, made to the funds that then hand out the scholarships, from their state income taxes. In some states with these so-called neovoucher policies, the tax credit is for the full amount of the donation; in others, it's for a percentage (e.g., 65% or 90% of the amount donated). Under the report's plan, eligible students would be able to receive these neovouchers, using the funds to

"top off" their education expenses. The report argues that this system of adding funds to the CSA program would save the state money because it would keep the CSA funding low. This ignores the fact that monies would still be diverted from the public coffers – and thus likely from the public schools—to fund private or other for-profit schools.

3. Child Safety Accounts empower parents to make the best decisions for their children.

   The report claims CSAs empower families who cannot otherwise afford to remove their children from the purportedly harmful school, allowing them to transfer to a new institution. The first section of the report ends by emphasizing the need for parents to control these funds, removing control from school boards and related organizations. It argues that parents are the stakeholders most concerned with their children's education and success, so they should have more autonomy in their ability to influence their schooling. Further, public schools should shut down if they are unable to keep their students:

   > The loss of these students and the education dollars that go with them would force these dangerous schools to improve security to keep their existing student body and to attract new students. If dangerous schools cannot manage to institute policies to keep their students safe and a significant number of students leave as a result, those schools will shut down. This stark reality is the best assurance that more children will be kept safe at school.[7]

   Accordingly, "students would be eligible for a CSA account if their parents have a 'reasonable apprehension' for their children's safety based on the experiences of their children, including bullying, hazing, or harassment" (p. 3).

III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report's rationale is based primarily on an ideological framework that prioritizes individual choice over democratic governance. The report argues that parents should be able to choose where their child goes to school based on their personal experiences. For parents who are dissatisfied with the current system, they can choose to opt out. The notion of education savings plans relies on the assumption that not only do parents deserve the right to choose their child's schooling trajectory, but also that state funds should support that choice even if that takes them outside of the public school system. The report implies that the bureaucracy of school politics is detrimental to students' mental and physical health, so it should be circumvented.

Most of the report's statistics attempt to present a bleak outlook for student safety in public schools, though some of the evidence (regarding gang and school shooting activity) presents a more balanced picture. The notion of the CSAs is mainly grounded in the evidence regarding bullying, harassment, and suicide prevalence in schools.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The use of research and non-peer-reviewed articles in this report is incomplete and biased towards advocacy for school choice and privatization. Much of the argument is based on data from non-academic, non-peer-reviewed, non-empirical reports and news reports. Most notably, the report, though based on the assumption that ESAs are proven and successful, fails to give any background on ESAs implemented in other states or the effects of those policies. Similarly, although CSAs/ESAs are a type of voucher program, the report fails to give any background on the effects of vouchers, including their lowering of math scores[8] and their tendency to allow for misallocation of funds[9], segregation,[10] and discrimination.[11] Further, the report does not include a discussion of policies concerning school safety, which would give a more comprehensive understanding of the problem at hand and present possible alternatives. Perhaps most importantly, research continues to show that children are safer when they are in school, with safety risks escalating during the afterschool hours.[12]

In short, the report does not seriously draw on research to support its contentions. It relies on biased, persuasive narrative instead of trustworthy and rigorous literature and research.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

This report does not include any research methods by scholarly standards. It is instead a *think piece*, making it impossible to review the methods used. That said, we again stress that the report oversimplifies the statistics that concern "school violence" and then offers up a proposed solution—CSAs—to fix the stated problem. There is no serious consideration of evidence-based approaches for addressing legitimate safety concerns. The report also fails to consider potential problems with the proposed solution, such as how to ensure that funds are equitably distributed, an explanation of where the funds will come from, or the possibility, even the probability, that there will be a misuse of funds.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

Overall, the report fails to justify why CSAs are the best possible solution to school violence. It fact, it fails to support the contention that CSAs are any solution at all. Though it presents data showing that school violence is a problem, it does not provide information on how the proposed policy will work in schools. Although data are available to make predictions about the effects of ESAs, the report fails to acknowledge this or related data from similar programs that shows the negative consequences. In doing so, it ultimately misleads readers.

The report suggests that CSAs should be funded through the state budget, but it fails to provide information about where in the budget money will come from, with the obvious concern that money would be diverted from underfunded public schools. This would ironically leave those public schools with decreased resources for, among other things, safety.

Further, the report fails to cite examples of how an ESA policy would function and has functioned in the past. How much funding, for instance, is available for each family that wishes to transfer a child to a new school? The amount will affect the type of family that will have this option. For example, if the CSA provides a relatively low amount of money, but it allows families to transfer schools, this will mostly benefit families who can afford to add their own funding to the CSA funding. If, on the other hand, the CSA provides a relatively high amount, then more lower-income families will find them useful but the program will take a bigger bite out of the state budget. Because the report does not provide definite state budget allocations or suggestions, it avoids considering these trade-offs.

The report also fails to address how, logistically, these public-school exemptions will be allocated—through lotteries, first-come first-served, or means-tested options. It does not provide any criteria for how these accounts will be accessed or how states might assess the legitimacy of any given parent's assertion of a "reasonable apprehension" for a child's safety. Without a clear definition or evaluation standard, it would be easy for the funds to be misused (e.g., going to families of students who may not be suffering from any meaningful safety concerns and who simply want a public subsidy for attending a private school). The need for spending oversight has also been shown by abuses of the ESA programs that have existed thus far.[13] To prevent misuse, more stringent monitoring would be necessary, but this is not suggested in the report.

Lastly, the report fails to address the core problem. Assuming that there are schools so unsafe that children cannot attend them, why is this the case? The report suggests that the solution to unsafe schools is to remove students, but it does not consider ways in which the schools can be made safer. Similarly, assuming that the CSAs help some students move to safer schools, what societal obligations—resources, interventions, etc.—are owed to the majority of students who are presumably still attending that unsafe school? Instead of making small-scale solutions (that, in the case of CSAs, are based on no meaningful evidence of past success), policymakers and school leaders might do better to focus on evidence-based approaches for creating safe and welcoming school cultures for their marginalized and bullied students. For all these reasons, the report is underdeveloped and fails to consider counterarguments or alternative policies.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

The report offers only a feeble combination of fearmongering and school choice to advocate for a policy that would probably lead to inequitable outcomes and misuse of public funds. It fails to acknowledge existing literature on other types of ESAs. It includes a substantial discussion of descriptive behavioral statistics but largely ignores necessary details about the proposed CSAs. Because this policy lacks data and details, the report fails to provide any viable policy solution. Merely removing students from their neighborhood schools is a superficial and inadequate way to address the real and urgent problem of school safety.

Notes and References

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