



Considering Your Nonpublic School Options



Tennessee
**Education Savings
Account Program**

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Introduction

In 2019, the Tennessee General Assembly passed and Governor Bill Lee signed Public Chapter 506. This law created the Tennessee Education Savings Account (ESA) Program.

The ESA program allows eligible students who are zoned to attend a Memphis-Shelby County district school, a Metro Nashville public school, or a school that was in the Achievement School District (ASD) on May 24, 2019 to use state and local money toward education expenses, including tuition and/or fees at approved nonpublic schools.

This guide provides information and guidance to families participating in the ESA program as they choose a school for an approved child. Note that the questions and considerations in this guide are suggestions for parents exploring the nonpublic school landscape; the Tennessee Department of Education does not endorse or recommend schools on an individual basis. A list of approved, participating schools is continually available and updated as needed on the ESA website.

Further information for participating families is also available at esa.tnedu.gov.

How do you find the best nonpublic school to fit your child's needs?

There are a lot of details to consider when choosing a nonpublic school in the ESA program.

Which things are most important to your family?

For example, are you looking for a school with:

 <p>A Family Atmosphere</p>	 <p>Supporting Staff</p>	 <p>Commitment to Parents</p>	 <p>Diversity, Inclusion</p>
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- Are you looking for a **faith-based** or **values-based** education?
- **Will your child require transportation?** Only some schools provide transportation.
- Does your child have any **support services** at his or her current school, such as language learning, math/reading support services, or tutoring?
- Does your child participate in **sports**?
- Does your child participate in **extracurricular activities**, such as choir, band, or drama?
- Will the school's **tuition and fees** be more than the ESA amount? Will you need financial aid?

Tennessee's ESA Timeline

As parents and guardians are thinking about making the choice for their child to attend a nonpublic school, parents should consider the timelines from reviewing the process, completing application, and choosing the best school for their child. Consider the general timeline below as a guide to support effective planning.

- *January to March:* Apply for ESA through the department's application process
- *February to April:* Tour participating schools considered a great fit for your child
- *May to July:* ESA decisions emailed to parents; Parents select a school for enrollment

After ESA Approval: Next Steps

Look at the list of participating schools on esa.tnedu.gov. Remember, ESAs can only be used for tuition at a participating school from this list. If you already have a school or two in mind that interests you or your child, check out the information those schools have provided on their websites. Otherwise, pick one to start.

You may want to consider each school's:

- Cost of tuition and required fees
- Academic calendar
- Admissions policy
- Student handbook
- School academic performance expectations
- Core values
- Curriculum
- Average classroom size
- Student body: co-ed or single sex
- Religious affiliation

Make a list of "pros and cons" about each school. On the "pros" side, list the things you or your child like about the school as well as how they match your needs or wants. On the "cons" side, list the drawbacks or your concerns about the school. *See page 6 for a "pros and cons" chart.*

Consider making an appointment for a school visit. Many schools encourage potential students to take a tour or shadow a child for a few classes during the day to get a feel for school fit. Schools also offer tours for parents to see classrooms, talk to teachers, and ask questions. *See page 7 for questions you might want to ask during your school visit.*

Financial Aid: Paying for Nonpublic School Tuition

You will notice that several participating nonpublic schools have tuition and fees that are more than the total amount for each ESA. If you choose a school that costs more than the ESA amount, you may need to explore financial aid and payment agreements for remaining balances. There are three main types of financial aid for nonpublic schools:

Grants: Money available for education, based on family income
Scholarships: Money available for education, based upon income, grades or athletics
Loans: Money available for education that must be repaid with interest, just like credit cards

Grants and scholarships do NOT have to be repaid and can be used in addition to the ESA. Private loans must be repaid with interest. It is important that you understand the school's fees and tuition payment policies. Any amount of tuition you agree to pay to the school can be sent to collections if you default on your tuition payment agreements. Review covered expenses when considering other financial responsibilities.

School Contracts

Most nonpublic schools require a family to sign a contract before the child is enrolled. You should read the contract and its terms carefully and ask questions before signing.

Once a contract is signed, there is a legally binding relationship between the family and the school. Families should read the school contract carefully and ask the school questions regarding options if an ESA is not approved or revoked. Once a contract is signed, if you change your mind or decide to enroll elsewhere, the school may hold you responsible for the remaining tuition.

If you have concerns about contract due dates, see if the school is willing to work with you to submit a fully signed contract after your ESA has been approved or renewed.

Use of Funds

The ESA Amount for participating schools is one amount for each school year. When choosing a school, consider that funds may only be used for the following educational expenses:

- Tuition at a participating school
- Required books at a participating school
- Required uniforms at a participating school
- Required technology at a participating school
- Educational Therapy/ Tutoring
- After-school educational experiences
- Summer educational experiences
- Transportation
- Some approved post-secondary education expenses

When considering a school, use the table below as a guide to consider other fees outside of the allowable use of funds. Ask if the school offers financial aid, grants, or loans to cover additional fees. Some of the items listed below are fees required by some participating nonpublic schools. The school may share a tuition amount for the entire school year or the amount by semester. Fees may differ contingent upon the school's schedule, requirements, curriculum, and offerings.

	School choice 1:	School choice 2:
Tuition		
Textbooks		
Uniforms		
Tutoring		
Technology		
Transportation		
Enrollment Fee*		
Educational Therapy/Tutoring		
Summer Program		
Other Fees:		
Other Fees:		

**Note that some fees, such as enrollment fees or application fees, are not covered by the ESA if not part of tuition.*

Your Turn: Pros and Cons When Considering Schools

School Choice 1:	
Pros	Cons

School Choice 2:	
Pros	Cons

Additional Notes:

Questions to consider during a school visit

Request a school tour and speak with the school personnel for specific questions that you may have about your child and the school's alignment to your own values and expectations. Your child may have specific interests or may have participated in programs or classes at their previous school that they want to continue. During a school visit, ask questions and observe classrooms to think more about class size, programs, and the best fit for your child. Some of the things to consider are:

Admissions:

- Is there an entrance or placement exam required?
- Are grants and scholarships available that can be combined with the ESA?
- Are scholarships available to cover the cost of extracurricular activities, after school care, sports uniforms, or field trips?
- Is the meal plan included in the tuition? If not, how are parents invoiced for meals?

The school day:

- What time does school start? When does school end?
- Can a child be dropped off early? Is there a fee if a child is picked up late?
- How do most children get to school: carpool, bus, parent drop off?
- Are bus or transportation services offered? If so, what is the fee and where are the stops located?
- What non-academic classes are required? What non-academic classes are offered (arts, physical education)?
- What is the technology policy? Are students allowed to carry cell phones? Is a computer required for class?
- Is study hall available during the school day for older students?
- When can a student receive support from a teacher?
- What is the school's attendance policy? How many absences are permitted?

Classroom and academics:

- What is the average class size or teacher-to-student ratio?
- How are the classrooms organized? What furniture and wall décor do you see? What values or principles are reflected in classroom spaces?
- How are the classrooms organized? Are the desks arranged for group work or individually?
- Observe teacher interactions and classroom flow: Do teachers lecture? Monitor student work during independent work time? Ask questions of students? Where is the teacher in the room?
- How often do students interact with teachers one-on-one or in small group settings?
- Are there classroom libraries? Science labs?
- How often is student progress monitored and how is it communicated?
- What support is offered if a child is struggling academically, behaviorally, or emotionally?
- What curriculum is used? What books are on the required reading list?

- What kind of assessments are used: tests, projects, presentations?
- Does the school offer standardized testing outside of the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP)?
- How are students grouped in classes or assigned teachers?

The campus and community:

- Is there dedicated space for outside activities such as recess? Would your child be participating in recess, given the grade level?
- Is there a visitor policy to maintain safety?
- Does the school offer fitness opportunities outside of sports? What are the gym facilities like?
- What student work is on display?
- What clubs or leadership opportunities are available to students?
- Are parents expected or required to participate in the classroom or at any school activities?
- How do teachers and school leaders communicate with parents?
- Are students required to participate in community service, clubs, or sports?
- Is there a school portal to check online? How often should it be reviewed?
- What safety protocols are in place, and how does the school communicate with families in the event of an emergency?

Your own reflection:

- Did you notice or feel a sense of community, inclusion, and your own family values?
- When reviewing the school’s code of conduct and behavior policies, do those reflect your family’s values?

Notes from your school visit:



Before the first day of school

Some schools offer summer meet ups for new students to get to know their classmates or visit campus. Check the school's website or ask the admissions office if these options are available.

If student orientation is offered, be sure to put it on your calendar early and prioritize going. Many times, student orientation is a perfect time for new students to learn where classrooms are and what to expect. Students may also meet teachers or classmates during this time, and some schools offer special times before the first week of school for new students to find their locker and visit their classrooms.

While your student is in an orientation meeting, introduce yourself to other parents to build friendships for both you and your child.

If there is a parent association, connect with other parents to support school events and learn about school activities.

Check the school website or with teachers to see what dates you may need to be aware of: student showcases, classroom observations, or parent-teacher conference dates.

Be sure to ask the admissions office or your child's teacher if there are other back-to-school events to build a support network for both you and your child.

Adjusting to a new school environment:

The first weeks of school

Just as any new school year may bring some uncertainties, a new school environment adds to those uncertainties. Starting at a new school can be an adjustment process for children and adults alike. As the first weeks of school pass, be sure to check in with your child and the school to see how your child is adjusting and how you can support the transition at home.

Consider asking your child questions, connecting with school personnel, and keeping normal childhood emotions and experiences in mind.

Set aside time to check in with your child. Instead of “yes” or “no” questions, try:

- What do you like best about your new school?
- What is different about your new school?
- Who said the nicest thing to you today? What did they say?
- What was lunch like? Who did you sit with? How did you choose your seat?
- How did the school make you feel comfortable?
- What’s your favorite class?
- What teacher do you think you’ll like the most?
- Do you have any concerns?

Consider the following:

New Friends

- It may take time for your child to make friends at a new school. If your child doesn’t seem to be adjusting, talk with your child’s teacher about support strategies.

Environment Changes

- Changing school environments can be difficult for children, especially if the child was at a former school for a few years or more. Meeting new classmates from different backgrounds or friend groups who have known each other for a long time can be hard for children. Check with your child’s teachers to see how well the adjustment is going during the first few weeks.

Support

- It will be important to identify a mentor for your child at the new school. This could be a teacher, guidance counselor, or coach who your child can go to if they experience stress at school

Planning for the school year: Beyond Week 1

First Month of School

Within the first or second month of attendance at the new school, your child's teacher may ask for a conference in person or on the phone. This is a short meeting to discuss academic progress, ask questions, and make sure that your child is receiving the support needed.

The teacher will guide you through the conference. You will want to be sure they cover the following questions:

- What do you see as my child's strengths? Where does he/she need support?
- Is my child keeping up with assignments and projects?
- What can I do at home to support my child's success?
- Does my child participate in class discussions and activities?
- Does my child have a group of friends?

Throughout the School Year

Check in with your child's teacher often to be sure they are on track with grades and assignments.

Review the school's calendar each month to be sure your family takes advantage of community and social events (*plays, concerts, grandparents' day, etc.*). These are valuable opportunities to make new friends, meet other families, and inspire your child to try new activities.

If you have any concerns throughout the year, reach out to your child's teacher by email first. Email will enable you to have a record of when you reached out and the teacher's response. If a teacher is part of your concern, don't hesitate to call or email the school principal or counselor.

Additional Considerations

Social media policy: Some schools have rules in place to prevent students from using social media to bully others or post inappropriate material both at school and at home.

Plagiarism: Plagiarism is when a student turns in someone else's work but claims it as their own. This can be confusing because some students can accidentally plagiarize when they copy an online source and forget to use quotation marks. Most nonpublic schools purchase software that can find plagiarism. It is very important that your child learns about plagiarism so that they don't accidentally break the school's rules.

Additional questions for consideration

What is the difference between an entrance exam and a placement exam?

Both entrance exams and placement exams are tests to measure your child's academic ability. If the school requires that students perform on grade level, the entrance exam is used to see if your child meets the school's requirements. For other schools, the placement exam is simply used to place your child in the right grade level, the right individual classes, or to provide additional services such as math or reading support for your child.

What is in the course syllabus?

Most colleges and universities use a course syllabus to clearly articulate grading scales and expectations of a course. Many nonpublic high schools use them so that high school students understand how to read a syllabus before college.

The course syllabus is simply a way for the teacher to let students know:

- The goals of the course
- The homework assignments and projects
- How homework or projects should be completed, such as formatting and submission guidelines
- What to expect if grades are weighted (ex: tests as 40% of the overall grade)
- Policies for late work or absences

Your local public library can also help high school students learn how to write papers according to a syllabus.

How does the school support long-term success?

For schools that are limited to a certain group of grades (elementary or middle schools), they often have visit days scheduled with other older schools so students can learn about their options early.

For high school students, schools may assist with the college application process or visiting colleges during school breaks. Ask the college counselors if these are options that interest your family.



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