

ESA HANDBOOK

EMPOWER
MISSISSIPPI
— ★ —



IS MY CHILD ELIGIBLE?

_____ Is your child a resident of Mississippi?

_____ Has your child received an Individualized Education Program (IEP) from a public school in the past 5 years?

If you checked YES on both of these questions, your child may be eligible for an ESA!

APPLYING FOR AN ESA

Submit an application online: <https://www.mdek12.org/OSE/ESA>

Be sure to include

- ✓ a copy of your driver's license or state ID
- ✓ a copy of your student's birth certificate
- ✓ a copy of any paperwork establishing authority if you are not the parent/legal guardian
- ✓ a copy of a utility bill, rental bill, or mortgage statement as proof of residency
- ✓ a copy of the student's most recent IEP
- ✓ a copy of the student's most recent eligibility determination or evaluation
- ✓ a signed "Responsibilities of Parents" form with initialed boxes.

After 21 days you will receive

- Notification of revisions needed to make an eligibility determination
- Notification of the student's eligibility or ineligibility for the ESA program

If you do not receive either notification within 21 days or if you believe your student has been erroneously denied an ESA, lodge a complaint with the Mississippi Department of Education. If you need help resolving an issue, contact Empower Mississippi.

To contact Jaecelyn Armstrong, MDE Division Director for the ESA Program:

- Call 601-359-3498
- Email jarmstrong@mdek12.org

To contact Empower Mississippi:

- Call 601-980-1897
- Email ESA@empowerms.org

Responsibilities of Parents

This form will require you to agree **not to enroll your child** in the [Dyslexia Therapy Scholarship](#) program, the [Nate Rogers Speech-Language Therapy Scholarship](#) program, a public school, or a home instruction program.

Mississippi's compulsory attendance law requires students to be enrolled in a public school, a private school, or a home instruction program. Though the ESA law does not mandate private school enrollment in order to take advantage of the program, private school enrollment is a current requirement by MDE.

You must also agree, if your child has not been diagnosed with a permanent disability, to recertify his or her disability through your home school district, a federal or state agency, or a licensed physician or psychometrist every three years after receiving an ESA. You must only submit documentation *upon request by the department*.

Remember:

1. You need an eligibility determination in writing for your records.
2. You should keep copies of all communication between you and MDE.

RECEIVING AN ESA

If your student is deemed eligible to receive an ESA, you will receive notice of

- Enrollment in the program due to available funds
- OR
- Placement on the wait list due to enrollment exceeding capacity

WHY?

The ESA program is dependent on annual funding by the state legislature. The program received \$3 million for the first four years of operation, and in the fifth year, the legislature increased funding to \$5 million due to the appeals of waitlisted families. Even though ESAs simply allow state tax dollars to follow your child from their public school to the educational setting and services of your choosing, ESAs are funded separately from public schools.

In order to complete your child's entrance into the program, you will receive an informational packet from MDE asking you submit the following paperwork:

Proof of Acceptance or Enrollment and a Certificate of Accreditation

The only requirement in choosing a private or online school is that it be state or regionally accredited, which you can find out easily by calling the school or visiting the website.

Although there is no list of eligible schools to review currently, approximately 200 Mississippi schools qualify, while numerous online programs and schools in adjacent states qualify as well.

Please note, by law, you may enroll your child in an accredited school outside of the state if you verify in writing to MDE that you cannot find appropriate services for your child within 30 miles of your residence. If you are unsure of your options, contact Empower Mississippi.

You will also be asked to

- Register as a vendor with the Mississippi Department of Finance and Administration
- Complete a W-9 Form
- Establish a Pay-Mode account with Bank of America

Placement on the wait list means your student is in line to receive an ESA when (1) another ESA student opts out of the program or graduates or (2) the state legislature increases funding for the program. Applicants will be notified of acceptance on a first come, first served basis until 50 percent of authorized ESAs are awarded, at which point a lottery must be held. The ESA law authorizes 500 new ESAs each year (even if funding is inadequate), so the number of authorized ESAs for 2019-20 is 2,500 (number of operational years x 500). Fewer than fifty percent of authorized ESAs (1,250) are available this year, which means all ESAs will be awarded on a rolling basis.

Remember:

1. Until enrollment in the program, applicants must submit a new application annually.
2. Keep a cumulative folder of all ESA paperwork, including sent and received dates.

USING YOUR ESA

The ESA amount varies slightly from year-to-year due to changes in the state's base student cost. For 2019-20, the amount is **\$6,765**.

Funds are available on a quarterly basis for direct payments to your child's school (with your authorization) or reimbursement. You are responsible for submitting [reimbursement forms](#) and itemized, original receipts by the appropriate dates.

Reimbursement Schedule

	Deadline to Submit Reimbursement Form	Funds Disbursed
Quarter 1	August 30	September 27
Quarter 2	November 29	December 20
Quarter 3	February 28	March 27
Quarter 4	May 29	June 26

IMPORTANT: If you do not spend any ESA funds by the second quarter each year, your child's ESA will be revoked.

You can spend ESA funds on any of the following:

- ✓ Tuition/fees at a private school
- ✓ Textbooks
- ✓ Educational services/therapy from a licensed provider
- ✓ Payment to a tutor
- ✓ Payment for curriculum
- ✓ Fee-for-service transportation to and from education provider
- ✓ Tuition/fees for online learning courses or programs
- ✓ Services provided by a public school (i.e. individual classes or extracurricular programs)
- ✓ Tuition/fees/textbooks at a postsecondary institution
- ✓ Computer hardware, software, and other technological devices if recommended by the school or a licensed educational practitioner or provider or a medical professional
- ✓ Fees for nationally standardized norm-referenced tests, Advanced Placement tests, and tests related to university admission
- ✓ Annual school supplies (no more than \$50.00)

Currently, money does not roll over year-to-year, so any funds you do not use will be returned to the state at the end of the school year.

Remember:

- Keep copies of all receipts submitted for reimbursement.
- Keep copies of all reimbursement forms submitted by date.
- Call or email MDE to verify receipt of reimbursement forms ahead of the submission deadline.

MAINTAINING YOUR ESA

Once your student is accepted into the program, you can maintain his or her ESA by abiding by the agreement you made in the “Responsibilities of Parents” form and by spending a portion of ESA funds by the second quarter of each school year.

If you follow these rules, your child will remain in the program until you opt out or the student graduates or turns 21, whichever comes first.

Did you know that some federal special education funding is set aside for students in private schools? While your child has no individual entitlement to district services while using an ESA, district agreements with private schools to provide services under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) may result in your child receiving district services in a private school, paid for with federal funds. Review your rights [here](#) and contact Empower Mississippi if you have concerns.

Did you know you can read the ESA law for yourself? [The Equal Opportunity for Students with Special Needs Act](#) is Chapter 181 of the Mississippi Code. Read it for a deeper understanding of your rights and responsibilities, and when you have questions, Empower Mississippi is here to help!