

Parental Satisfaction Survey of the Education Scholarship Trust Fund (ESTF) 2025-26 School Year



**Dr. Jenny May, EOC Director of Qualitative
Research and Stakeholder Engagement**

Dana Yow, EOC Executive Director

December 2025





CONTENTS

Introduction and Background	2
Allowable Use of Funds	4
Parental Satisfaction Survey Development	3
Findings	7
Strengths of the Program	8
Opportunities to Improve the Program	12
Policy Considerations of Administrative Practices	15
Recommendations	16
 Appendix	 17
Appendix A	



Introduction and Background

In June 2023, [Act 8 of 2023, or the South Carolina Education Scholarship Trust Fund \(ESTF\)](#) became effective. The law provided guidelines for implementation and evaluation of the program beginning in the 2024-25 school year. During the first year of implementation, a Supreme Court ruling changed allowable use of funds by eligible families and changes were made to the source of funds used. As a result the enabling legislation changed, and the [current program](#), managed by the [SC Department of Education](#), is governed by [Act 11 of 2025](#). While there were changes made to implementation of the program, the requirement remained that the Education Oversight Committee complete an annual parental satisfaction survey and share results with the General Assembly by December 31st each year. This report is provided in accordance with that requirement, and a report of learning gains and academic performance will be completed when required data are available.

Enabling Legislation

Pursuant to Section 59-8-110(E):

(E) The Education Oversight Committee shall:

(1) comply with all student privacy laws;

(2) report on and publish associated learning gains and graduation rates to the public by means of a state website with data aggregated by grade level, gender, family income level, number of years participating in the program, and race and a report for any participating school if at least fifty-one percent of the total enrolled students in the private school participated in the ESTF program in the prior school year or if there are at least thirty participating students who have scores for tests administered. If the Education Oversight Committee determines that the thirty participating-student cell size may be reduced without disclosing the personally identifiable information of a participating student, the Education Oversight Committee may reduce the participating-student cell size, but the cell size may not be reduced to fewer than ten participating students;

(3) evaluate and report the academic performance of scholarship students compared to similar public school populations; and

(4) collaborate with the department to develop and administer an annual parental satisfaction survey for all parents of scholarship students on issues relevant to the ESTF program, to include effectiveness and length of the program participation. Results of this survey must be provided to the General Assembly by December thirty-first of each year.

Differences Between Act 8 of 2023 and Act 11 of 2025:

During the 2024-25 school year, eligible students were those who were residents of South Carolina, attended a public school or had not yet been Kindergarten-eligible due to age, and household income did not exceed 200% [federal poverty rate](#). Eligible students approved to participate in the program could access a \$6,000 scholarship distributed on a quarterly basis in the amount of \$1,500 to be used on qualifying expenses approved by the SCDE. Students were required to leave their home school district to access funds. During the 2025-26 school year, eligible students were those whose household income did not exceed 300% of the federal poverty rate (\$96,450 for a family of 4), and the award per child is \$7,500, with a cap of 10,000 participating students. Students were not required to leave their home district to access funds.



Table 1: Changes in ESTF

CRITERIA	<u>ACT 8, 2024-25 SCHOOL YEAR</u>	<u>ACT 11, 2025-26 SCHOOL YEAR</u>
 FAMILY INCOME	200% Federal Poverty Rate	300% Federal Poverty Rate
 SCHOOL ENROLLMENT	To access funds, student must have been enrolled in SC public school the previous school year and be enrolled in different district or private school for the 2024-25 school year. Student may NOT participate in ESTF and Educational Credit for Exceptional Needs Children's Fund program and funds may NOT be used for home instruction.	To access funds, student must NOT be enrolled in resident school for the 2025-26 school year. Student may NOT participate in ESTF and Educational Credit for Exceptional Needs Children's Fund program and funds may NOT be used for home instruction.
 CAP	5,000 students total	10,000 students total
 RESIDENCY	Must be a SC resident	Must be a SC resident
 AMOUNT GRANTED	\$6,000	\$7,500
 ALLOWABLE USE OF FUNDS	Reading books Curriculum Instructional Materials Tutoring Computer Hardware Technological Devices Educational Therapies Services Provided by a Student's Non-Resident School District Fees for Transportation *Education Service Provider Tuition and Fees *Tuition and fees for an Approved Non-public Online Education Service Provider or Course <i>*Asterix denotes funding was allowable during initial implementation but changed during the 2024-25 school year.</i>	Textbooks Reading books Instructional materials/school supplies Tutoring Education service provider tuition and fees Tuition and fees for an approved nonpublic online education service provider or course Computer hardware Educational therapies Services provided by a student's non-resident public school Technological devices Fees for transportation Required school uniforms

Allowable Use of Funds

For the 2025-26 school year, there were **12 categories of approved expenses** outlined and described in the Educational Scholarship Trust Fund Participant Guide. These allowable expenses include:

Textbooks *(K-12 in the following subject areas only):*

- Math
- English (including grammar, reading, and writing)
- Science (including Coding and Engineering)
- Social Studies (including History)
- Foreign Language
- Art
- Music

Reading books: Fiction and non-fiction literature in hardcover or paperback form, consistent with literature allowed in school libraries subject to SC Code 59-31-15 and all related regulations.

Required School Uniform: Uniform clothing items that are required for school attendance, complying with school dress code policy (limited to \$500/year).

Instructional Materials/School Supplies *(no bulk, individual student use only):*

- calculators (including graphing—calculators are limited to \$200 a year, graphing calculators are limited to a purchase of one every two years)
- index cards and card “holders”
- markers (to include dry erase and highlighters)
- notebooks (including composition notebooks)
- paper (lined, copy and/or graph)
- binders
- pencils
- pens
- colored pencils
- crayons
- erasers
- rulers
- folders
- glue
- scissors
- USB cards

Educational Therapies:

- Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) Therapy
- Speech Therapy
- Physical Therapy
- Occupational Therapy
- Vision Therapy
- Dyslexia and Dysgraphia Therapies

Computer Hardware *(used primarily for a scholarship student’s educational needs and approved by department or a licensed physician):*

- Laptop, desktop, and tablet computers- computer and tablet are limited to \$1,500 each (those identified as “gaming” will not be approved).
- Printers and ink- monitor and printer are limited to \$300 each, one per student every two years (3D printers are not approved).
- Headphones- headsets are limited to \$200 per year.
- Printer toner cartridges – printer toner cartridges are limited to \$100/purchase and \$300/year (product warranties included as part of the purchase are approved).

Technological Devices *(Used primarily for a scholarship student’s educational needs and approved by the department or a licensed physician):*

- Keyboard
- Mouse/mouse pad
- Apple pen
- Protective case for technology (IPad case, laptop case etc.)

Tutoring:

- Math
- English (including Grammar, Reading and Writing)
- Science (including Coding and Engineering)
- Social Studies (including History)
- Foreign Language

Education Service Provider Tuition and Fees *(invoiced by independent schools, not to include food, field trip, fundraising, graduation, and child care fees):*

- Enrollment/registration fees
- Technology fees
- Supply and book fees for classes or courses taken during the school day
- Academic testing and assessment fees

Tuition and Fees for an Approved Nonpublic Online Education Service Provider or Course:

- Math
- English (including Grammar, Reading and Writing)
- Science
- Social Studies (including History)
- Foreign Language
- National norm-referenced examinations, advanced placement examinations, or similar assessments, industry certification exams, or examinations related to college or university admission
- Test preparation classes/courses are also approved

Services Provided by a Student’s Non-Resident Public School:

- Out-of-district fees
- Individual classes
- After-school tutoring services
- Transportation (up to \$3,000/school year)
- Fees or costs associated with participation in extracurricular activities.

Fees for Transportation: Paid to a fee-for-service transportation provider for the scholarship student to travel to and from an eligible provider, not to exceed \$3,000 for each school year.



Parental Satisfaction Survey Development

Survey Development Process and Methodology:

In 2023, EOC Chair April Allen created a special ad-hoc subcommittee, a Survey Advisory Group (SAG), to advise and assist with decision-making related to surveys, administration, and related projects. The SAG was instrumental in the development of the initial parental satisfaction survey administered by the EOC in partnership with SCDE in 2024. The survey that was developed last year using other states' parent satisfaction surveys for school choice programming was reviewed for this year's implementation by the SAG and while some items were added or edited, the items largely remained the same to determine the overall level of parent satisfaction. Survey items can be found in Appendix A.

Recommendations from the SAG resulted in a final version of the survey with eleven items designed to take approximately 15 minutes to complete. The survey was developed using the SurveyMonkey platform and was shared to all ESTF families approved to participate using the Classwallet platform. Responses are kept anonymous in reporting of results, with any potentially identifying information, such as a child's name or school shared by respondents, redacted. Parents were instructed to complete the survey once per participating child, so that each child's experience could be captured. For example, if a parent had two children receiving ESTF funds, they were asked to take the survey twice.

Respondents:

Rolling admissions maintain a waitlist with 10,000 students accepted for the 2025-26 school year. Of these 8,980 students were active at the time of survey administration (November 3, 2025). Classwallet sent a message to 5,271 parent emails alerting families of the opportunity to participate in the parent satisfaction survey. Because some parents have multiple children participating, these emails represent all 8,980 students participating in the ESTF program, according to Classwallet. During the two-week survey administration window, there were 1,669 responses reflecting the experiences of participating students. Of the parents who completed the satisfaction survey, 1,288 (77%) were participating for the first time and 374 (23%) were returning for the second year.

The survey response rate was calculated two ways to ensure that findings were representative of all participants. The parent-level response rate was calculated by dividing the number of parent responses by the number of parents invited to complete the survey. This 32% response rate exceeds the typical 25% benchmark for open-response surveys, indicating that the results are reliable and reflective of the group overall. The student-level response rate was calculated to determine the student experience as reported by the parent. This response rate was 19% which falls below the commonly-accepted benchmark. However, surveyed parents reported having 2,973 students participating in the ESTF program, which is 1,304 more than there were reflected in completed surveys. This discrepancy suggests that there may have been confusion created by the request to complete the survey once for each child participating which may have impacted the slightly lower response rate. This will be considered in future parent satisfaction survey administrations.

Respondents were asked why they applied to participate in the ESTF program, and several themes emerged:

- Financial support or relief
- Academic or behavioral supports
- Desire to access different educational options
- The program was recommended or required by an educational institution

"(We applied to ESTF) For lots of reasons: 1. We were referred by our school to apply, 2. We are a family in need, 3. We transport our child outside of his district and school zone to meet his IEP needs."

Financial Support or Relief:

There were 1,606 narrative responses to this open-ended question, and 922 (57%) stated financial relief as the reason for applying for ESTF funds. Of the comments that were primarily about other reasons for applying, finances were still mentioned 60 more times. Financial motivation was by far the most noted reason for applying to the ESTF program.

"We are financially tight and this was a huge blessing for us! As it provided the funds for my daughter to attend school!"

Academic or Behavioral Supports:

One hundred and thirty-five (8%) parents referenced unique student needs, such as health or additional special education supports, as a reason to apply for a specialized school. Other parents reported their student was behind academically and needed tutoring they report as being unaffordable without ESTF.

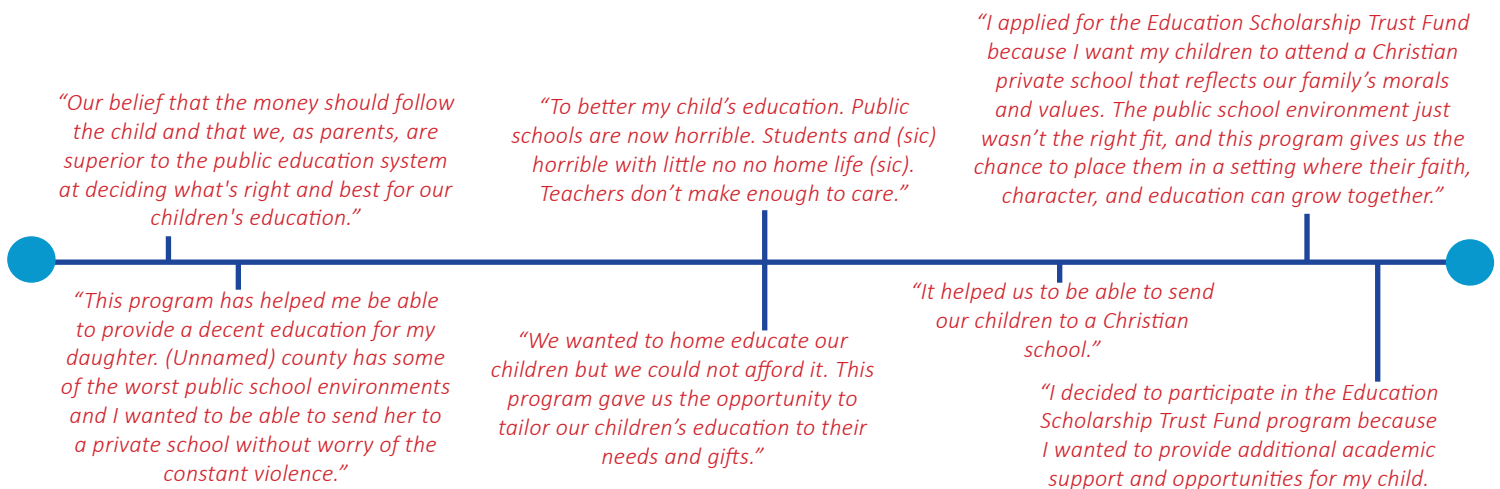
"(We applied) To receive assistance in covering costs for my son's educational needs. He is special needs and going to a public school would cause a lot of anxiety for him."

"My son has autism and needed a special school for autistic children."

"My daughter has sickle cell disease and sometimes miss a lot of school. I think this can help with tutors and provide other options."

Desire for School Choice and Educational Options:

While some respondents referenced a mistrust of their residential public school or district or poor performance, most referenced a desire for specialized services, smaller class sizes or a religious or cultural environment parents perceived as "better". Over 400 parents (25%) referenced a desire for choice and options as their motivation for applying to the ESTF program.



Program Recommendation or Requirement:

Some parents reported that they applied to participate in ESTF because it was recommended to them by their child's participating school, tutor, therapist, or another parent who has been pleased with the program. Of the 129 (8%) of parents who applied because it was encouraged by providers or other parents, two parents reported it was required by the school they are sending their children to. Additionally, five respondents stated that their employer required it.



Findings

The survey used a Net Promoter Score (NPS) to gauge overall satisfaction and those findings are described in the next section. The NPS is used for an item with a scale of 10 options and is widely used to measure customer experience. In this case, the NPS was used to measure satisfaction or likelihood to recommend the program to others. A score of 10 is the most satisfied, or highest promoter, with 0 representing the least satisfied, or strongest detractor. Depending on the response, participants in the ESTF program fall into one of three categories to find the NPS score:

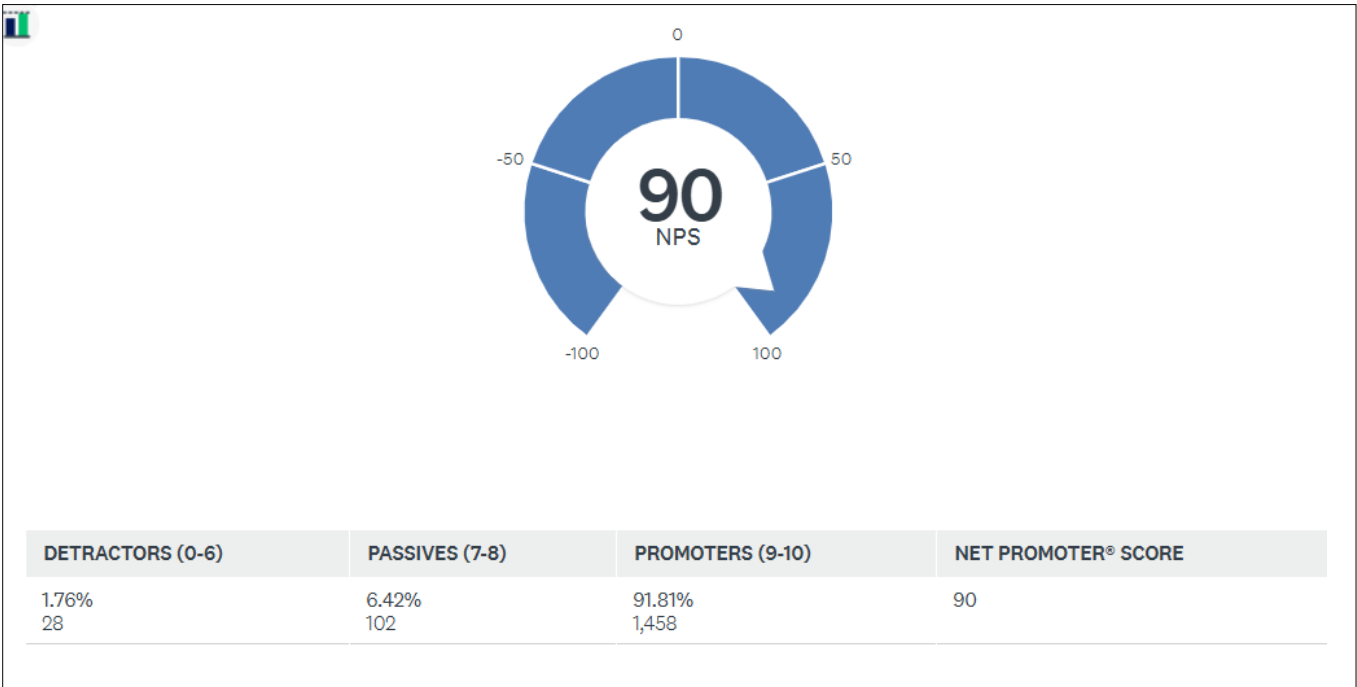
- Promoters respond with a score of 9 or 10. These participants are enthusiastic and happy with their experience with the program.
- Passives respond with a score of 7 or 8. These participants are satisfied with service but are not happy enough to be considered promoters.
- Detractors respond with scores from 0 to 6. These are unhappy participants who are unlikely to recommend the program and may discourage others from participating in it.

The NPS score is calculated by subtracting the percentage of detractors from the percentage of promoters. The developers of this method of analysis frame NPS:

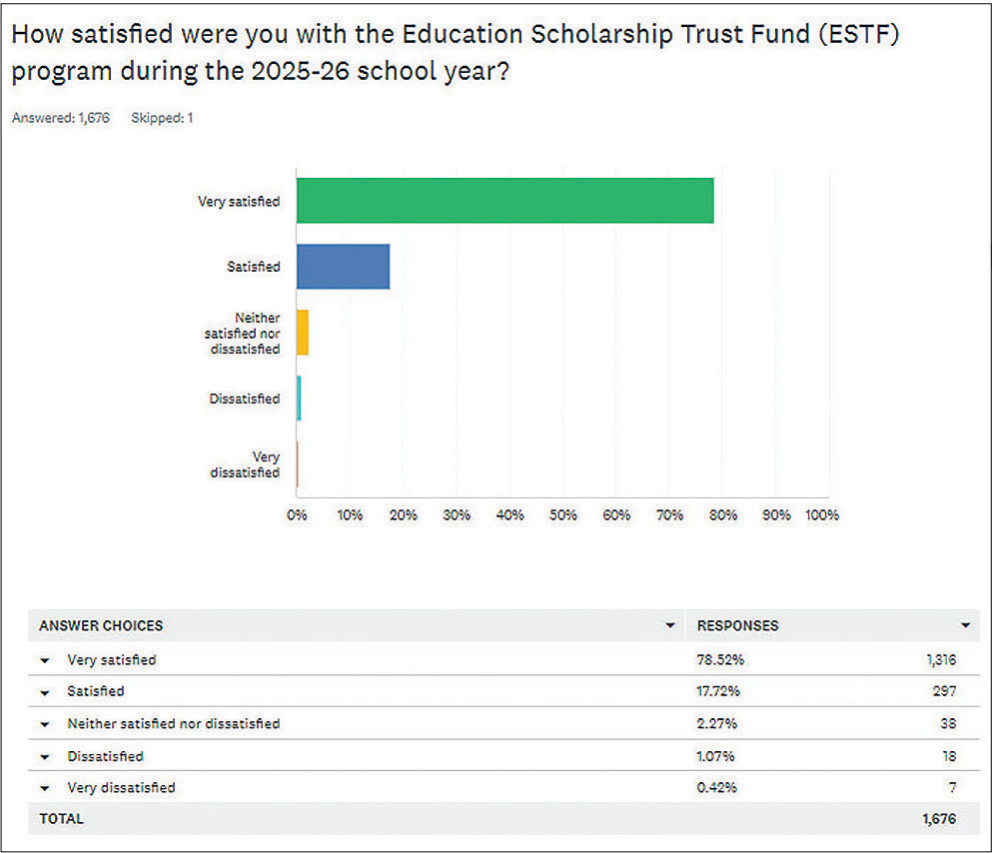
- Above 0 is good as there are more promoters than detractors.
- Above 20 is favorable.
- Above 50 is excellent.
- Above 80 is world class.

When asked how likely they were to recommend the ESTF program to others, 1,668 respondents (9 skipped) gave the program an NPS score of 90. There were 29 detractors (2%), 108 passives (6%) and 1,531 promoters (92%).

Graph 1: ESTF NPS for 2025-26 School Year:



Graph 2: Parent Satisfaction with the ESTF Program During the 2025-26 School Year:



Strengths of the Program

This NPS and satisfaction rating illustrate a marked improvement from the initial year of implementation. Respondents were particularly satisfied with the financial relief provided by the program, the flexibility in how ESTF funds could be used—such as for school tuition, tutoring and other supports. Student learning and well-being—along with the quality of customer service and the ease of accessing funds were also prevalent strengths of the program this year

“It’s a wonderful program making choice possible for many families; thank you!”

“I have nothing but amazing things to say about this scholarship.”

“(the best thing about this program is that it is) helping a mom like me who is disabled but wants more for their child.”



Financial Relief:

The \$7,500 in financial relief available for educational expenses was overwhelmingly viewed as the strongest aspect of the ESTF program. Approximately 40% of respondents identified funding as the program's top benefit, and many others reinforced this by citing funding as a secondary strength with products/services purchased using ESTF funds as the primary strength. Families reported being able to "keep their children in private school" because of these funds, stabilizing the educational environment. Of families who achieved this stability with ESTF dollars, most were first-year participants, suggesting that while the opportunity to enroll in private school previously existed, the program increased families' comfort and confidence in doing so. Others reported a benefit to their family being able to purchase school supplies, technology, or pay for tutoring with ESTF funds rather than relying on their family budget.

"Being able to purchase a computer for the family"

"Not having to pay tuition fees-- a break on my pockets!"

"Having the freedom to add tutoring. Math tutoring, especially, is expensive but so helpful!"

"Being able to continue my son on the path he started on. Private school education."

Allowable Use of Funds:

Many families appreciated the flexibility and variety of services and products to enhance their child's education that ESTF funds could provide. Of the 1,417 open responses identifying the strengths of the ESTF program, 219 (15%) stated flexibility and variety as the best part of the program.

"Giving my children another opportunity for learning outside of the traditional schooling atmosphere"

"My son being able to get vision therapy"

"The best part is being able to teach my daughter at home."

"Having Outschool classes & tutoring for my kids to pursue their academic interests, plus the technology (iPad, tablet, laptops) to support those online courses."

Student Learning and Well-Being:

While only 4% of parents reported an improvement in student learning or well-being as a strength of the program, those that did reported joy in being able to watch their children achieve on grade-level, experience confidence in the classroom, and engage with academic material.

"Finally seen my son smile again, he was depressed and hated school. This opportunity changed all that and helped him finally make friends for the 1st time in the 8 school years."

"I have been able to provide the correct testing and therapies that my daughter needs to help make sure she has a successful education."

"My child/learner has complex needs that would not be met in a traditional classroom. I have been able to order instructional materials that are tailored to his interests, which sparked his interest in learning. This learner has avoidant behaviors but is very smart. So by ordering regulating material as well as custom material based on interest, we have been able to make great progress in learning. Additionally, the learner is often sick, and by at home educating, we don't have to worry about missing days or being absent, as in a traditional school setting."

Administration of the Program:

The administration of the program was reported as a strength by 25% of respondents. The ease of application, paying invoices and the platforms used were noted specifically as strengths of the program. Many parents found the system simple and intuitive and there was a great deal of appreciation for customer support available.

"(It was a) smooth process overall from beginning to end."

"Very easy to use, website is good! We're very grateful"

"I can do everything online and without having to make calls or attend meetings. This allows me to fit this into my schedule."

Customer Service:

Respondents noted that while the process to apply and access funds or services was easy, when there were problems or questions, help was available. More than 80 parents (6%) described the customer service as the best aspect of the program.

"Once I understood the process it was very easy."

"Amazing customer service and support in everything that I needed help (with)."

"Very educational videos and zoom meetings to get help with everything from applying to submitting invoices."

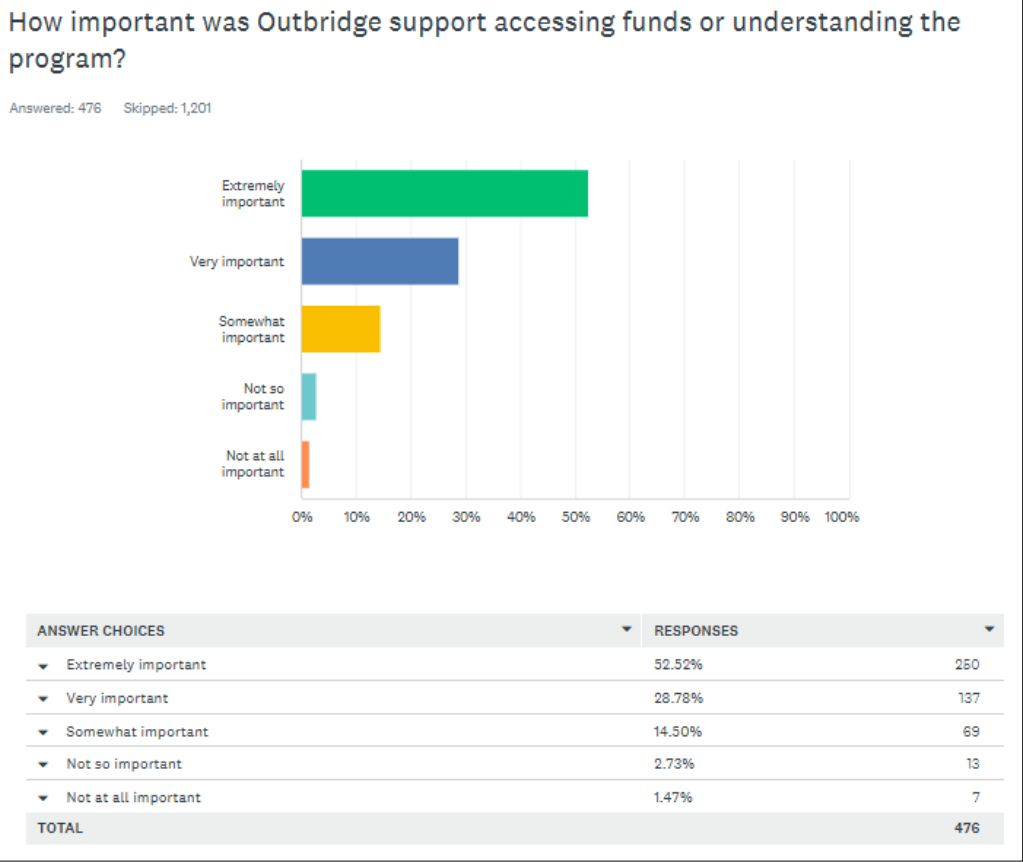
"The support is phenomenal, every time I contacted someone they seemed enthusiastic to help. This isn't just a job to them. They actually care... The encouragement was humane and more than is expected from an institution serving so many people."



Outbridge Support:

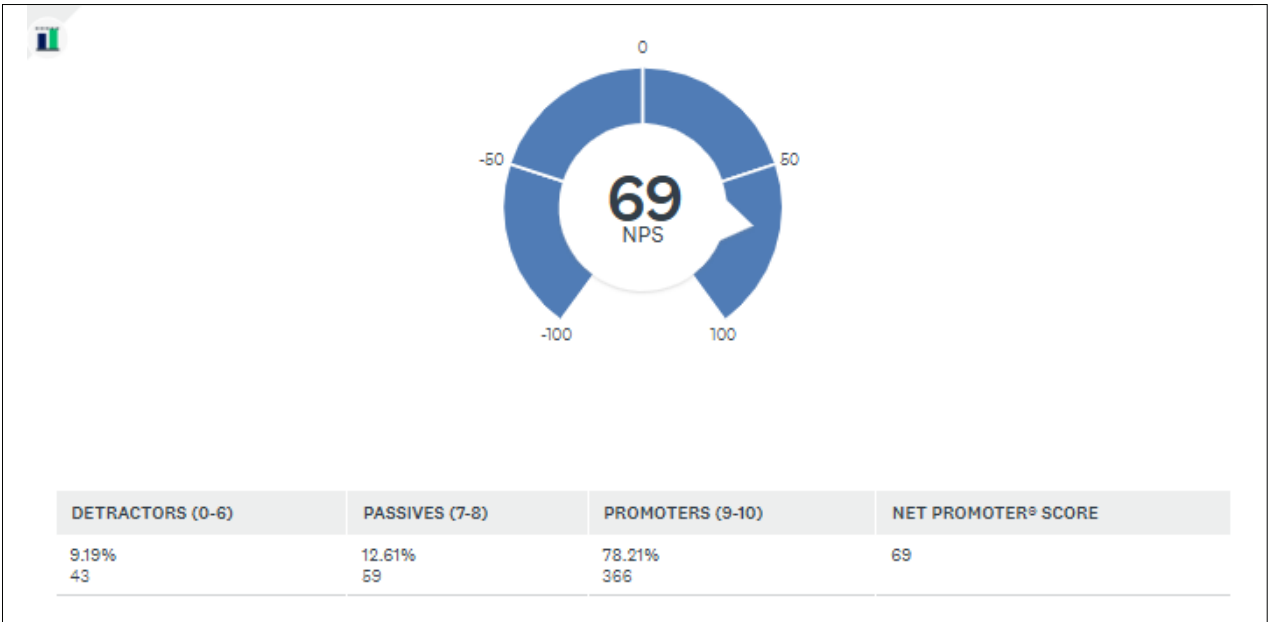
Outbridge was used again for the second year of implementation to support families participating in ESTF with the process of applying and using funds. Not all families interacted with Outbridge support, but for those that did, items were included on this survey to determine satisfaction with experiences with Outbridge. Approximately 470 families or 29% of respondents used Outbridge support navigating the ESTF program, and of those, 388 or 82% found Outbridge support extremely or very important to their success accessing funds or understanding the program. Only 20 respondents, or 5% found Outbridge support “not important.” When asked how likely they were to recommend Outbridge support to other participants of the ESTF program, 469 respondents gave Outbridge support an NPS score of 69, which is excellent. There were 43 detractors (9%), 59 passives (13%), and 367 promoters (78%).

Graph 3: Parent Satisfaction with Outbridge Support during the 2025-26 School Year



“The ease of applying, using Outbridge and knowing my grandson is getting a better education than he was before thanks to this program.”

Graph 4: Outbridge NPS for 2025-26 School Year





Opportunities to Improve the Program

When parents were asked to report the worst part of their experience with the ESTF program, less than 800 parents completed this open response question and of those, 43 or 5% reported how happy they were with the program. *"I am so grateful for the program, nothing is bad."*

Comments that only expressed satisfaction and did not mention an area for improvement are included in the report but are not counted when calculating the percentage of respondents who were dissatisfied with a specific topic.

"I cannot complain about free money, no complaints"

Communication and Customer Service:

While many parents reported satisfaction with the information provided about the program and customer support, not all participants had a positive experience with the administration and communication of program policies, leaving some opportunity to improve.

"It would have been nice to receive information about how exactly the program worked - such as money being received quarterly & how to purchase/order school supplies."

"It is hard to get a response email back."

"Not many vendors know the program and there needs to be a support or faq"

"Wording can be difficult to understand"

"Customer service does not get back to customers at all."

Administration:

Despite many parents being pleased with program administration, there were challenges related to the administration of the program that were described by 216 (29%) of respondents. They span a variety of topics including: technology, application process and requirements, and vendor approvals.

Technology:

Challenges and confusion resulted from a variety of platforms used to implement the ESTF program which respondents reported creating interface errors and confusion regarding which platform to use for what activity and process. The most commonly reported point of dissatisfaction was difficulty related to uploading documents.

"We had trouble getting the right document from our children's healthcare provider for verification. The website wasn't specific as to what form they required and kept rejecting the forms the healthcare provider sent us"

"Being able to submit the right proof of a "bill" for tuition; the drag and drop option wasn't working for me (as I had an email bill) and it took me hours to figure out that I needed to convert something to a PDF for it to accept it"

"(The worst part has been) Uploading invoices and supporting documents to Class Wallet; the preferred method is screenshot. I had been frustrated before figuring this out."

Application Procedures:

Application Procedures were also reported as a challenge for families who would prefer for the application for the next school year to be automatic and more streamlined.

"The application process was difficult and not very clear."

Vendor Approvals:

Another common difficulty was determining approvals from vendors and reporting inconsistencies between the same service from one quarter to the next.

"The seemingly moving target of getting invoices approved. It seems like the team managing this process follows different criteria for approvals, as I've submitted MANY invoices identically and weren't always approved."

A lack of clarity around why certain schools/vendors were approved, while others that weren't approved created dissatisfaction and frustration.

"(the worst part was) Them not approving the school our children attend to be service providers. They were discriminated against by the SC State Department of Education."

Approved Use of Funds/Vendors:

While some parents considered the variety of products and services that could be funded through ESTF dollars a strength of the program, 202 (27%) were frustrated by what was not allowable and what vendors needed to be used. School uniforms, transportation, school lunch and field trips were most frequently described as weaknesses of the program. While school uniforms and transportation are allowable, the required uniform for some students is sold from an unapproved vendor making it allowable, yet inaccessible. The same challenge was described when attempting to pay for transportation. School lunches, field trip fees and extracurricular programming (specialized sport or art training) are not allowable use of ESTF funds, and some parents reported dissatisfaction with that.

"realizing that we couldn't go anywhere to use the money, only approved vendors. We were hoping things like Ballet class would be covered."

"it was difficult to tell if my educational vendor was "real" -- there was no address, no identifier to verify the location"

"I couldn't use the allocated fund as I projected for my son. (sic)"

"...I wanted to be able to pay for my child's extracurricular trainings. For example, he plays a school sport but some of the players train on the weekend a specialty coach. That coach is not censored through the school so I wasn't able to pay him using the funds."

"We can't use it for the tuition for dance or golf or art supplies."

"The worst part has been the lack of options for vendors (which I understand we are still early in the program). And also because of trying to use a specific reading tutor for my son. She applied back in July 2025 and STILL has not been approved. She has reached out and so have I. Class Wallet keeps saying they haven't received her background check from the state and the state says they never received the request to run the background check from Classwallet. She has the receipt and everything to show she paid and sent everything off on her side. I am still having to pay out of pocket for these weekly sessions, for most of the school supplies and for the uniforms. This will be a great program and I am excited about how well my son is doing, but unfortunately it has been very costly for me out of my own pocket when I have plenty of funds sitting there."

"Trying to get vendors approved! PLEASE HIRE SOMEONE that this is the sole purpose of their job. VENDOR APPROVAL"

"Having to resubmit invoices repeatedly due to rejection, when previous ones submitted without issue" "I am not as tech savvy as most, I struggled a little with the sign ins, navigating the website and downloading my information to qualify."

"It is difficult to get national brand uniforms paid for, such as Lands End or Athleta"

"Transportation does not allow outside vendors, it has to be through the school and my son does not offer transportations so I'm am paying for Lyft everyday, which is expensive."

"Why is the ESTF micromanaging to the point that the program is difficult for those using it? Students who need more educational opportunities are being denied those options. Equestrian Science was denied as being a vendor because it "doesn't match the scope and sequence of the program". The Governor's School that specializes in agriculture offers equestrian science, but not every child is old enough for the program or parents don't want to have their child live away from home for high school. When trying to utilize the option for extracurriculars through the school district the school district doesn't know how to categorize some students and what legally is available since its not specifically listed in legislation..."

Some parents reported that they would like to use funds in 4K settings. While South Carolina offers a variety of free, state-funded 4K programs for families at or below 200% of the federal poverty level, or for children at risk of not being ready for kindergarten, including Head Start 4K, families who qualify for ESTF may not be able to access these programs because the ESTF financial threshold is 300% of poverty. It is recommended that CERDEP eligibility be expanded to align with ESTF financial threshold, or that ESTF funds be approved for use in 4K settings.

Vendor Charges:

Respondents reported that charges for private school tuition, or school supplies were more expensive than if payments were made without ESTF funding procedures.

(The worst part of the program is) "Paying more than the others that pay cash."

"Some needed items were not covered, or were much more expensive in the market place."

"We thought our funds would go further, but when the school found out we had received the ESTF scholarship, they no longer gave us a previous discount. We would have preferred to have the option of reimbursement so that we can choose how to spend those funds without schools setting prices based on what they know families are receiving."

"The costs of supplies with vendors is more expensive than outright purchases from the same vendors."

"That (the worst part of the program) would have to be that the school has access to the amount that we are getting before we do. They knew how much my son was getting before I did and raised the amount of tuition to match the amount my son was awarded. Before the amount my son was awarded would have paid for the tuition and the before/after school care that I need since I am a single parent."

Wait Time:

Two hundred and thirty-five (31%) parents were dissatisfied with the length of time for acceptance to the ESTF program, for approval for items/services, or approval of a desired vendor to be approved to participate in the program. Waiting for funds limited opportunities to enroll in online classes before they were full and paying for tuition out of pocket before the funds were available was a challenge for some families.

"Order approvals take very long- in the webinar, it stated that it takes 2-5 business days. I have orders that have taken over 15 business days to be approved."

"...some families can't afford to pay and wait on you guys to pay back I think you guys should provide a debit card for that. I also there should be more supplies available for kids like I could purchase pencil pouches and I also could purchase protection for electronics."

"It would be very convenient if we could opt to have the entire amount just sent to the school for tuition at the beginning of the year. Maybe parents who are paying schools directly could have that option?"

Amount of Funds:

The overwhelming response to satisfaction with the ESTF program illustrates how pleased most families were to have \$7,500 to offset educational costs this school year, and there was some dissatisfaction with the amount of funds.

"(We)Need a little bit more funds for materials. With \$7500 tuition did not have any left over for supplies."

"The amount doesn't fully cover for middle and high school level grades (tuition)."

"I wish the scholarship was larger."

For the 2026-27 school year, there is a planned increase in funding per family, which will likely address this issue.

Parent Pressures:

Roughly 7% of respondents reported feeling anxious while learning the process and platforms of the ESTF program. Some nerves were the result of using technology to apply for the program or use funds, and some were simply the result of uncertainty with the new program.

"Being new to the whole process (was the worst part of the program)."

"not knowing what to expect (was the worst part)--much better as I go!"

"Learning what and how to submit invoices for tuition payment took a bit of learning."

"I'm not always sure what to do on the computer.."

While rare, some parents were concerned about the impact their participation in ESTF had on the community at large.

"(I) Wonder if my participation hurts the public schools."

Discretion:

Some parents reported feeling self-conscious because there is a financial component to ESTF eligibility and the school community would have knowledge about their financial status.

"A lot of parents work at the school and I would rather do a reimbursement to keep the financial assistance discreet."

"Feeling a little singled out among school families... I can feel aware that we are one of the 10 percent of families at the school who qualify for the aid, and that can feel a little intimidating... My family just felt grateful for the award, so it put us in an awkward position."

Policy Considerations of Administration Practices

Employee Benefits:

Results of the parent satisfaction survey alerted staff to a practice used by at least one private school that is worthy of consideration to ensure the ESTF program is administered in alignment with the priorities and intent of the law. It is the practice of some private schools to offer tuition for employees' students as a benefit, and the tuition break is covered by the school. At least one school has required employees with children at the school to apply for ESTF and use the funds for tuition, so the tuition break is now covered by ESTF funds, saving the school money but not increasing the benefit to the family.

"I received no benefit since the covered expenses were previously covered by my employer."

"To maintain my education benefit at work, I was required by them to put 100% of the funds toward tuition and could not put any towards any other educational expenses."

It is worth state level administrative time to determine if this process is aligned with the goals of ESTF and take steps to ensure that administration of ESTF funds benefits the priority stakeholder first.



Braiding ESTF with Other Funds:

Some parents reported a desire to access the Educational Credit for Exceptional Needs Children (ECENC) in addition to the ESTF program. Many parents have been applying or were advised to apply for both programs and select one as law prohibits participation in both. This process can create confusion, and parents in need of funds for children with complex needs will be forced to choose between two programs they qualify for. In cases when parents did attempt to utilize both programs and it was discovered, rectifying the problem required administrative time at the local level and the family experienced a loss of funding.

"I'd hoped to have access to a specialty school for my child, but because SPED students cannot stack the ESTF with the exceptional needs credit it makes the tuition still too much. Other states also allow more funding for SPED students that I hoped we would have access to in order to enable access to those additional educational opportunities. My child still needed access to more than what the school was providing, and this allowed that to happen to some degree."

It is worth time considering if the ESTF and ECENC programs can be braided for families who qualify for both. Another option is for administrators of both programs to work together to identify families approved for both at the state level. They could then help those families choose one program before they plan their budgets, since currently they are legally allowed to use only one supplement.

Recommendations

From the research completed to determine parent satisfaction with the ESTF program, several recommendations have emerged:

1. Administer the survey once to families regardless of how many children are participating in the ESTF to reduce burden on parents and have cleaner response rates to determine reliability of findings. Additionally, it is recommended that EOC staff convene a group of parents participating in ESTF to review survey items and administration instructions to improve completion rate.
2. While some parents reported dissatisfaction not being able to braid ESTF funds with other scholarship funds for students with disabilities, EOC staff completes school approval processes for the Educational Credit for Exceptional Needs Children program and completes an evaluation annually. Because of this unique perspective, staff has been made aware that some students are receiving both grants, which is expressly prohibited in the law. It is the recommendation that SCDE staff implementing the ESTF program connect with Exceptional SC staff and determine a process to identify and prohibit students from accessing both funds, or that using both funding sources be made allowable for families. Either of these options will protect agency staff and families from violating the law.
3. Home instruction is expressly prohibited in Act 11 as it was in Act 8, yet some surveyed parents report satisfaction being able to use ESTF funds for homeschool curriculum to provide home instruction to their children. This allowable use of funds creates confusion, so it is recommended that homeschooling be an allowable choice for ESTF or that homeschool curriculum be removed from the allowable use of funds.
4. Dissatisfaction was reported at not being able to purchase school uniforms, which is allowable, from unapproved vendors that sell the uniforms specific to private school. The cost of items at approved vendors compared to other, unapproved vendors was also noted in open responses. It is recommended that the SCDE convene a group of parent participants to: make recommendations about vendors and the process for purchasing items, and review communication (processes and messages) regarding approved or unapproved items.
5. Consider vendor and educational providers obligations to families in SC by participating in the program and require certain behavior to participate. For example, private schools requiring employee participation to offset the cost of a tuition benefit to the employee family should be considered. While the curriculum cannot be influenced by ESTF administrators, participation agreements can be made that do not influence school programming so that families benefit in a noticeable way from this program. Similarly, reports that approved vendors charge more for items through the Classwallet marketplace than as an individual purchase not associated with the ESTF program should be investigated, and if found true, regulated through ESTF participation agreements.
6. It is recommended that 4K tuition be considered as an allowable use of funds, or that CERDEP eligibility be expanded to align with the ESTF financial threshold with students under 200% of poverty served first.

Appendix

Appendix A: 2025-26 School Year ESTF Survey Items:

Survey items and instructions (in SurveyMonkey)

Please complete this survey designed to measure parent satisfaction of the Education Scholarship Trust Fund (ESTF) program during the 2025-26 school year. Your open and honest feedback will be used to improve the program in the future. You and your child's identity will remain anonymous when survey results are shared with the General Assembly. Your words may be quoted to share your experience, but any identifying details like names and locations will be omitted to protect privacy. Your feedback is important for improvement of the program.

Please complete a separate survey for each child accessing ESTF funds one time. The survey will take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. Thank you for your participation!

Section I:

1. Is this your first year participating in the Education Scholarship Trust Fund (ESTF) program

Yes No

2. How many children do you have participating in the Education Scholarship Trust Fund (ESTF) program? (Please complete this survey separately for each child's experience, so we can understand the program experience for each individual child participating)

Enter number

3. How likely are you to recommend the Education Scholarship Trust Fund (ESTF) program to others?* (10 options)
4. How satisfied were you with the Education Scholarship Trust Fund (ESTF) program during the 2024-25 school year?* (10 options)

Section II:

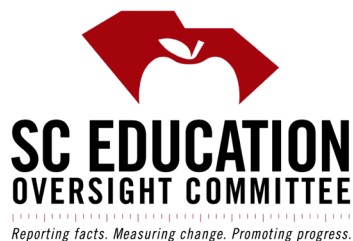
5. How did you use the funds from Education Scholarship Trust Fund (ESTF) this school year? (description included)
 - i. Education Service Provider Tuition and Fees
 - ii. Textbook and Student Workbooks (K-12 in the subjects of: Math, English, Science, Social Studies, or Foreign Language)
 - iii. Reading Books
 - iv. Curriculum in the Following Subject Areas: Math, English, Science, Social Studies, or Foreign Language
 - v. Instructional Materials/School Supplies
 - vi. Tutoring
 - vii. Computer Hardware (desktop, laptop etc.)
 - viii. Technological Devices (printers, apple pen, keyboard etc.)
 - ix. Tuition and Fees for an Approved Nonpublic Online Education Service Provider or Course
 - x. National Norm-Referenced Examinations (AP, industry certification etc.)
 - xi. Educational Therapies (ABA therapy, vision therapy, evaluation for therapy equipment etc.)
 - xii. Services Provided by a Student's Non-Resident District (out-of-district fees, transportation, fees or costs associated with participation in extracurricular activities etc.)
6. Overall, how satisfied are you with (use of funds) so far?
7. Do you see an improvement in your student's academic achievement that you believe is the result of (use of funds)? (yes, no, I'm not sure)
8. Have you used Outbridge support during your participation in the Education Scholarship Trust Fund (ESTF) program? If yes, 2 Outbridge items:
 - a. How important was Outbridge support accessing funds or understanding the program?

- b. How likely would you be to recommend Outbridge support to another family participating in the Education Scholarship Trust Fund (ESTF) program?

Section III.

- 9. What was the best part of your experience with Education Scholarship Trust Fund (ESTF) program this school year? (text box)
- 10. What was the worst part of your experience with the Education Scholarship Trust Fund (ESTF) program this school year? (text box)
- 11. What else should we know about your experience with the Education Scholarship Trust Fund (ESTF) program, but haven't asked about? (text box)

1205 Pendleton Street
Room 502 Brown Building
Columbia, SC 29201
www.eoc.sc.gov



The South Carolina Education Oversight Committee (EOC) is an independent, nonpartisan group of 18 educators, business people, and elected officials appointed by the legislature and governor. The EOC enacts the South Carolina Education Accountability Act of 1998, which sets standards for improving the state's K-12 educational system. The EOC reviews the state's education improvement process, assesses how schools are doing, and evaluates the standards schools must meet to build the education system needed to compete in this century.