

EDUCATION IMPACT

# At least \$7.2 million in taxpayer funds spent on LEGO sets through Arizona's school voucher program, records show

12News uncovered the spending, including one family spending \$30,000 on LEGO sets, after suing Superintendent Horne and Treasurer Yee to obtain ESA public records.



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PHOENIX — Parents participating in the ESA program have spent \$7.2 million on LEGO sets since 2022, when the program was expanded to all Arizona students, according to new public records obtained by 12News after the news outlet sued two state officials.

The spending data includes:

- 22 families who spent at least \$10,000 each on LEGO sets
- Nearly 500 LEGO sets costing \$500 or more
- 175 high-end LEGO sets themed around Star Wars
- One family reimbursed \$16,000 for LEGO sets alone
- Another family spending close to \$30,000

The scale of the spending surprised even longtime critics of the program.

"I am used to being flabbergasted by the numbers coming out of the ESA voucher program, but \$7.2 million on LEGOs does surprise me," said Beth Lewis, executive director of the advocacy group Save Our Schools Arizona. "As a taxpayer, I find it really offensive."

## 12News sues to get ESA public records

For nearly a year, 12News Investigates has fought to gain access to public records from Arizona Schools Superintendent Tom Horne and State Treasurer Kimberly Yee.

Both officials oversee Arizona's education voucher system — a program known as Empowerment Scholarship Accounts (ESAs) — and they are currently competing against each other in the Republican primary for state superintendent.

After taking the matter to court, 12News finally obtained more than 5.5 million detailed receipts from the program. The records reveal how taxpayer-funded ESA dollars are being spent — and one of the categories stood out: LEGO sets.

## A previous dispute

Lewis and her group first raised concerns about LEGO purchases in 2023. At the time, Superintendent Horne pushed back publicly.

In a press release, Horne stated:

"No ESA parent has been reimbursed \$500 to buy LEGOs."

But the department's own recently released records to 12News Investigates tell a different story.

Just five months after Horne took office, the Department of Education approved:

- \$611 for LEGO purchases in one account.
- \$776 for LEGO sets for the same parent about two weeks later.
- \$1,623 for LEGO sets the next month for that parent.

Records now show that the family ultimately received about \$16,000 in reimbursements for LEGO set purchases.

## Experts question oversight

Education policy researchers say the purchases highlight broader questions about oversight within the voucher program.

Jennifer Jennings, a professor at Princeton University who studies school choice policies, analyzed the data for 12News.

She said extreme spending cases stand out.

"Thirty thousand dollars worth of LEGOs — that's the outlier," Jennings said. "But those outliers raise questions about what kind of policy structures are in place to ensure a child's primary educational materials aren't just LEGOs."

Jennings noted that many of the most expensive purchases were large collector sets, including multiple Star Wars-themed kits costing hundreds of dollars each.

"There's a series of Star Wars-related LEGO sets that constitute the high end," Jennings explained. "But there's also plenty in the middle range — \$400 or \$500 sets."

## State says LEGO are allowed

Superintendent Horne declined an interview for the story.

However, a spokesperson for his office told 12News that LEGO sets are considered an allowable educational expense under the ESA program and are commonly used in classrooms across district and charter schools.

Critics argue the issue is not the educational use of LEGO sets, but the amount being spent.

"When I had LEGOs for my students, I used them for years and years for every class," Lewis said. "And when I was done with them, I donated them to another teacher. There's no reason

to be spending \$30,000 on LEGOs for one child.”

The Arizona Department of Education did not respond to questions about why repeated high-dollar LEGO purchases were approved.

### **12News previously uncovered \$1 million in LEGO purchases**

In June of 2024, 12News published an analysis of nine months showing more than \$1 million in LEGO set purchases, including 84 sets costing at least \$500.

At the time, Republican State Senator Ken Bennett said he would support limits on ESA purchases of high-end LEGO sets.

Senate President Warren Petersen - who remains in the position today - declined to consider reforms.

Gov. Katie Hobbs, a Democrat, has called for ESA reforms during her entire tenure in office. However, the Republican-controlled Legislature has refused to implement any changes since the program was expanded in 2022.

### **A billion-dollar program**

ESA vouchers typically provide families with \$7,000 to \$8,000 per student each year to use for private school tuition, homeschooling costs, or educational materials.

Students with special needs can receive more than \$40,000 annually.

More than 100,000 students now participate in the ESA program statewide.

Supporters say the vouchers help families find specialized learning environments for students with disabilities, homeschooling programs, and small “micro-schools.”

But critics say the rapidly expanding program lacks sufficient oversight.

This year alone, Arizona is expected to spend more than \$1 billion on ESA vouchers.

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