Chapter:

Customer Service

Introduction

Purpose

Families, schools and education service providers entering ESA programs are venturing into new educational territories and require clear, timely and supportive guidance. Program administrators can demonstrate, from the beginning, that it is possible to provide customer service tailored to families exploring new educational options for their children and providers aiming to cater to them. This chapter will equip program administrators with the knowledge and strategies needed to build an effective and responsive customer service model that meets the evolving needs of stakeholders.

Review Statutory Language

Customer service initiatives will differ across states, shaped by the specific statute that governs each program. Prior to developing a customer service strategy, conduct a review of the statutory language that governs the program from an implementation perspective to understand the following:

- All requisites pertinent to customer service, such as satisfaction surveys and reporting.
- Appropriation and budget review for implementation, that includes any line items for customer service.
- Whether an in-house solution or procurement of a third-party solution is required to fulfill customer service needs.

Approach to Design

This chapter outlines an approach for developing a customer service implementation plan suitable for both new and existing ESA programs by providing the following:

- Identification of customers and their needs.
- Summary of customer service principles that prioritize transparency, efficiency, and empathy.
- Step-by-step guide for developing a customer service plan.
- Recommendations for policies, procedures, and metrics that ensure customer service is accessible and responsive to stakeholders, including team management practices and integration of technology.
- Evaluation techniques to optimize customer service delivery.
- Practical examples that highlight best practices.

Guide to Customer Service

Purpose

This section offers program administrators an overview of the process involved in creating a customer service plan. It covers customer identification, customer needs assessment, principles of customer service, and a range of tools to effectively engage customers. Acting as a primer, this section equips program administrators with a foundation upon which they can expand and develop more comprehensive strategies.

Customer Identification

Identifying the customers of an ESA Program is straightforward. While program administrators may recognize additional customers, these are likely to be of secondary importance. The customers listed below will account for most of the workload. Families will be the priority audience.

Families	Parents or guardians applying or participating in the ESA program.
Education Providers	Schools, organizations, tutors, therapists and other institutions or individuals offering educational services to ESA-enrolled students.
Advocacy Groups	Community organizations or organized groups of parents and/or providers dedicated to assisting families in navigating the ESA program.

Needs Assessment

After identifying the customer, program administrators should understand their needs and the barriers that may prevent these needs from being met effectively. By addressing these specific barriers, administrators will be better equipped to fulfill the diverse needs of their community. The below table identifies the most common needs and barriers, but program administrators may expand on them based on their local demographics.

Customer	Needs	Barriers
Families	• Understanding eligibility criteria • Questions about the application • Navigating educational options • Flexibility with fund allocation • Financial management and transparency • Access to timely, accurate resources • Managing appeals	• Non-native English-speaking families may encounter difficulties understanding program information • Families residing in remote or rural areas may face additional hardship accessing information • Mobile phone access only
Education Providers	• Understanding eligibility criteria • Issues with the application • Receiving payment for services rendered • Issues with reimbursement • Support communicating with families • Dispute resolution • Compliance with guidelines	• Limited staff & time • New businesses • Understanding payment timelines and the impact on cash flow
Advocacy Groups	• Resources to assist families and education providers with all above needs • Understanding back-end processes • Access to up-to-date information on law and rule	• Inability to provide timely, accurate information as the first point of contact for families

Principles of Customer Service

Families have a strong and emotional investment in their child's educational success, thus requiring program administrators to provide prompt and empathetic customer service. To steer the program staff's interactions effectively, program administrators should apply a set of principles to guide their approach to customer service. Below are a few principles to consider:

Family-Centric Approach: Family's needs and experiences are at the forefront.
Build Solutions to Meet Customers Where They Are: Services are easily accessible to all families, regardless of their situation.
Timely and Accurate Information: The cornerstone of commitment, ensuring families have the right information at the right time.
Transparency: Processes are transparent to build trust and understanding among families.
Efficiency Without Compromise: Processes are streamlined to reduce wait times and improve service delivery without sacrificing quality or care.

Customer Service Tools

There exists a wide variety of tools to enhance the program's support capabilities and ensure that it responds to the needs of customers. See the options below, which include both online and offline to cater to diverse family preferences and situations.

★ = must-have tools for every program

★ **Handbook**	Comprehensive guide specifically tailored for parents and education providers detailing all aspects of the program.
Tutorials & Webinars	Interactive modules to provide real-time guidance and address questions directly on topics such as applications, account management, etc.
Resource Library	Articles and recordings of tutorials and webinars for self-service help.
★ **Telephone Hotline**	Direct line to speak with a representative or parent advocate for immediate help, essential for addressing urgent inquiries and providing personalized support.

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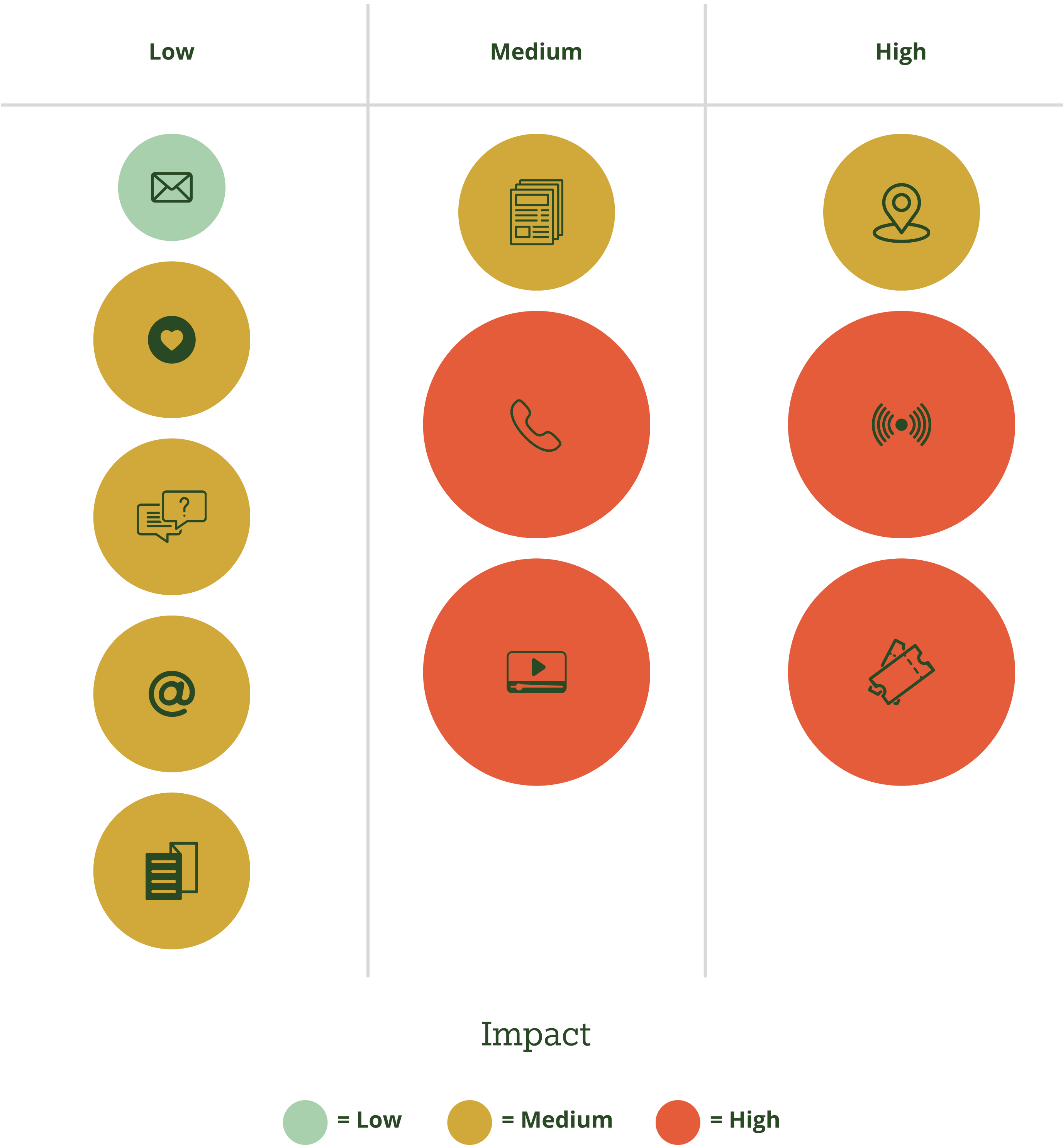
Email Support	Trackable and formal way for customers to request assistance, essential for handling complex issues that require thorough explanation or for participants who prefer written communication.
Help Desk Ticketing System	Lives on website or portal, allowing customers to submit, track, and update their help requests online.
Mail Correspondence	Provides an alternative for handling forms, official documents, or for customers without digital access.
Physical Office *(office hours or by appointment)*	Accessibility to participants.
Social Media	Quick customer service and engagement.
Live Chat	Lives on website or portal, offering real-time assistance via a person or AI tool that can provide automated responses. See Section on Artificial Intelligence.
FAQs *(Frequently Asked Questions)*	Website or brochure with answers to common questions.

Implementation Effort



Customer Service Strategy

Purpose

The preceding section offered a guide for identifying the customer and understanding their requirements. Expanding upon this groundwork, this section equips the program administrator with an outline to craft a thorough customer service strategy that is both supportive and effective, placing a strong emphasis on a user-centered experience.

Policies and Procedures

The first component of developing a customer service strategy is to set policies and procedures. When developing policies and procedures, incorporate the following:

> Consider existing internal resources and systems that can be utilized for these purposes, such as existing IT infrastructure, customer relationship management software, compliance and security systems and protocols, and relevant interdepartmental staff expertise.

Maintain an internal directory of communication channels
Define the various customer support service channels, such as telephone hotline, email support, live chat, and social media, etc. (See Customer Service Tools). Include information for each, such as business hours and dedicated staffers.

Set quality assurance protocols
Equip all customer support channels with robust quality assurance protocols. For instance, implement call recording systems for telephone hotlines to maintain audio recordings of interactions. Similarly, electronic channels such as email and live chat should incorporate mechanisms to track inquiry details and resolutions effectively.

Establish issue resolution processes
Establish a standardized process for handling customer inquiries, complaints, and issues via the various customer support channels. Define escalation procedures for complex or unresolved issues, ensuring timely resolution and follow-up.

Communicate data security and privacy
Clearly communicate privacy policies and procedures for handling personal data to ensure compliance with data protection regulations.

Conduct account authentication
Utilize secure authentication methods such as multi-factor authentication (MFA) to verify the identity of account holders and authorized representatives to prevent unauthorized access to accounts.

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Mitigate against conflict of interest
Prohibit customer service staff from helping individuals with whom they have personal relationships or any activities that could confer unfair advantages.

Establish dispute resolution and appeals
Define transparent procedures for handling disputes between account holders and customer service staff, including avenues for appeals and formal resolution processes.

Provide accommodation
Ensure accessibility for individuals with disabilities and diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Benchmarks

Next, the program administrator should create benchmarks to measure quality. Examples of measurements to set benchmarks against include:

Customer Satisfaction: Average satisfaction levels of customers with the support services provided *(See Section: Customer Satisfaction Surveys).*

Information quality: Accuracy, helpfulness, and relevancy of response to the customer's question.

Wait time: Average time a customer waited on hold before customer service staff answered an incoming call.

Handling time: Average time it takes to handle customer inquiries or issues from initiation to resolution.

First Contact Resolution: Percentage of customer inquiries or issues resolved during the initial contact with customer service staff.

Professionalism: Customer service staff's respect and consideration for the customer.

Abandonment Rate: Percentage of customer inquiries or support requests that are abandoned or not resolved due to long wait times or dissatisfaction with service.

Accessibility Metrics: Monitor metrics related to accessibility and accommodation for individuals with disabilities or diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Team Management Practices

The team of staff dedicated to customer service must be equipped with the necessary skills and expertise to deliver excellent support. Below is a checklist of team management practices to incorporate:

- [ ] Provide ongoing training on relevant topics such as program policies, communication skills, and conflict resolution techniques.
- [ ] Establish clear performance goals and metrics for customer service staff, aligned with the benchmarks.
- [ ] Streamline the process for escalating customer inquiries from staff to supervisor.
- [ ] Require supervisors to regularly review established quality assurance mechanisms, such as information tracking and audio recordings. Supervisors should use insights to provide staff with clear and timely feedback and coaching to improve performance.
- [ ] Analyze the workload percentage dedicated to responding to customer service inquiries in a calendar year, and adjust staffing as needed.
- [ ] Solicit feedback from customer service staff about their experiences, challenges, and suggestions for improvement.

Continuous Improvement

Incorporate methods for continuous improvement of customer service to reduce wait and handling times and improve quality of delivery. Below are a few recommendations to achieve this:

- Be responsive to advocacy partners' inquiries as they can relieve some of the workload as they work to directly assist families. Families usually approach advocacy partners for guidance so program administrators should consider them customers.
- Monitor benchmarks to adjust customer service policies and procedures and improve customer service delivery.
- Incorporate customer feedback into proposed changes to law or rules governing the program.
- Map out the customer journey to identify touchpoints, pain points, and opportunities for improvement across their lifecycle in the program, from account setup to account management.

Artificial Intelligence

Purpose

A program administrator can leverage AI to enhance their customer service strategy in several ways, particularly through the implementation of AI-powered chatbots. This section provides examples of how to incorporate AI into the customer service strategy.

Enhancing an ESA Program with an AI Chatbot

Providing parents with accessible and interactive information is crucial. Static documents, such as parent handbooks, often contain essential details but can be overwhelming and difficult to navigate. Transforming these static documents into an AI chatbot can significantly enhance the experience, making it easier for parents to find the information they need quickly and efficiently. Here's how an AI chatbot can bring a parent handbook to life.

Benefits of an AI Chatbot

24/7 Accessibility: Unlike traditional support channels, an AI chatbot is available round-the-clock, allowing parents to access information whenever they need it.

Instant Responses: Chatbots can provide immediate answers to common questions, reducing the wait time for parents and improving their overall experience.

Personalized Interaction: By understanding the context of the user's queries, chatbots can offer tailored responses, making the interaction more relevant and useful.

Reduced Workload: By handling routine inquiries, chatbots can free up human staff to focus on more complex issues, increasing overall efficiency.

Language Translation: The English-only parent handbook can now be translated in nearly every language instantly with an AI chatbot.

How AI Chatbots Work

Creating an AI chatbot can seem daunting, but understanding its key components can simplify the process, even for a layman. By breaking down the chatbot into its essential elements—knowledge base, intents, entities, dialog management, natural language processing (NLP), and training and optimization—anyone can build a functional and effective chatbot. These components work together to enable the chatbot to understand, interpret, and respond to user queries accurately. With the help of no-code platforms, a layman can leverage these components to create a chatbot that brings static documents, like a parent handbook, to life, providing interactive and accessible information to users.

Chatbot Component	Description
Knowledge Base	The core repository of information that the chatbot uses to provide answers.
Intents	Represent the goals or purposes behind a user's queries, enabling accurate and relevant responses.
Entities	Specific pieces of information within a user's query that help refine the chatbot's response.
Dialog Management	Guiding the conversation flow to ensure smooth and coherent interaction.
Natural Language Processing (NLP)	Technology that enables the chatbot to understand and interpret human language.
Training and Optimization	Continuous updating and refining of the chatbot's components to maintain effectiveness.

Implementing a Chatbot

To implement an AI chatbot for an ESA program, follow these steps:

Step 1

Choose a No-Code Platform
Select a user-friendly platform that requires no coding skills.

Step 2

Gather and Structure Content
Collect and organize the information you want your chatbot to provide (e.g. parent handbook, vendor platform instructions, program rules, FAQs).

Step 3

Define Intents and Entities
Identify the types of questions users will ask and the key terms they use.

Step 4

Use Pre-Built Templates and Flows
Utilize existing templates and customize the conversation flows.

Step 5

Integrate the Knowledge Base
Ensure all relevant content is accessible for the chatbot to reference.

Step 6

Test Your Chatbot
Simulate interactions to verify the chatbot's accuracy and effectiveness.

Step 7

Deploy and Monitor
Launch your chatbot and continuously observe its performance and make improvements.

By transforming a static parent handbook into an interactive AI chatbot, ESA programs can provide parents with a more engaging and efficient way to access crucial information, ultimately enhancing their overall experience and support.

See our test chatbot made for parents to have a conversation with Arizona's ESA Parent Handbook.

The integration of AI chatbots represents just the beginning of AI's transformative potential. As technology advances, AI is ushering in an era of unprecedented innovation and efficiency. Other areas of ESAs where AI will likely be implemented include financial management, compliance reporting, market trend analyses, and more.

As we explore the future, it's imperative to consider data security and privacy implications that accompany its widespread adoption. AI can be made to keep data secure by implementing strong encryption, access controls, anonymization techniques, and regular monitoring to detect and respond to security threats promptly. By doing so, we can harness the full potential of AI while safeguarding the privacy and integrity of those it serves.

Satisfaction Surveys

Purpose

This section provides examples of satisfaction surveys to gauge families' experiences during various stages of the ESA program and attain valuable feedback for improvement of the overall program.

Practical Example

When designing satisfaction surveys, program administrators can adhere to three steps: determining the various touchpoints during the program to administer the survey, crafting the survey questions, and selecting the survey format. The following section details these steps and provides illustrative examples.

Step 1

Begin by deciding the various stages of the ESA program that customers will be surveyed. Below are examples of instances where the program administrator might solicit feedback.

Application Completion: Integration of a survey at the conclusion of the application process or provision of a survey link upon families' completion of the ESA program application.

Account Setup: Survey emailed upon verification of setting up the ESA account for their child.

Account Management: Survey incorporated into the process of or after families allocate funds to cover educational expenses

Telephone Hotline: Following every call a family or education provider makes to request assistance, conduct a dial pad survey.

Email Support: At the conclusion of the resolution, email a survey link.

Help-Desk Ticketing System/Live Chat: Survey available either within the portal or at the end of the live chat session.

Annual Review: Annual survey to review overall satisfaction, experiences, and suggestions for program improvement.

Program Exit: Upon exiting the ESA program, to gather feedback on the overall experience and reasons for discontinuation.

Stationary: General survey linked on stationary resources, such as the FAQ page, resource library, parent handbook, tutorials and webinars, physical office, and social media bio.

Step 2

Then, decide the specific information you aim to acquire from customers. This will help formulate the questions. Below are examples of the questions program administrators might ask of families or education providers.

For Families

- How easy was it to apply for the program?
- How satisfied are you with the flexibility of funds for educational expenses?
- How satisfied are you with the ease of accessing and managing your account?
- How satisfied are you with the clarity of the program guidelines?
- How likely are you to recommend this program to other families?
- In what areas do you think the program could improve to better meet your needs?
- How satisfied are you with the transparency of fees and charges?
- How satisfied are you with the educational outcomes or opportunities provided through the program?
- How satisfied are you with the communication received from the program regarding updates or new features?
- How would you rate the professionalism and friendliness of staff?
- Were you able to reach the helpline easily when you needed assistance?
- How satisfied are you with the timeliness of the response or resolution provided?
- Did the agent provide clear and understandable information?
- Did the agent demonstrate knowledge about the ESA program and its policies?

For Education Providers

- How easy was it to become an approved education provider within the program?
- How satisfied are you with the reimbursement process through the program?
- How satisfied are you with the level of communication and support received from program administrators?
- How satisfied are you with the timeliness of payments or reimbursements for services provided?
- How satisfied are you with the flexibility offered by the program in terms of eligible educational expenses?
- How satisfied are you with the clarity of instructions provided for submitting invoices or documentation for reimbursement?
- How likely are you to recommend this education savings account program to other education providers?
- How satisfied are you with the level of administrative burden associated with participating in the program?
- How satisfied are you with the communication received from the program regarding updates or new features?

Step 3

After formulating the questions, select the format of the satisfaction survey. Surveys can come in various forms, each serving different purposes and offering unique insights into respondents' opinions and experiences. Below are examples of common formats that program administrators can utilize. An important factor to keep in mind is that the surveys should be simple to understand, swift to complete, and easy to submit.

Open-Ended Questions
Allows respondents to freely express their thoughts, opinions, and feedback without being constrained by predefined options. Open-ended questions can provide rich qualitative data but may be more time-consuming to analyze.

Likert Scale
Rating scale where respondents indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with a statement, typically ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree" or from "Very Dissatisfied" to "Very Satisfied." Likert scales provide quantitative data and are easy to analyze.

Multiple-Choice Questions
Respondents select one or more options from a list of predefined choices. Multiple-choice questions offer a balance between structured data collection and respondent flexibility.

Net Promoter Score (NPS)
This is a metric used to gauge customer satisfaction based on a single question: "How likely are you to recommend [product/service/company] to a friend or colleague?" Respondents typically select a rating from 0 to 10, categorizing them as Promoters, Passives, or Detractors.

Customer Effort Score (CES)
This metric assesses the ease of a customer's experience with a product or service. It typically involves asking respondents to rate the ease of completing a task or resolving an issue on a scale, often from "Very Difficult" to "Very Easy."

Customer Service Case Study

Practical Example

Purpose

One effective approach to enhancing customer service and outreach is through peer-to-peer efforts. This case study examines Parents for Educational Freedom North Carolina (PEFNC) and their successful implementation of a Parent Liaison Team, which leverages the power of connecting families to empower them to make informed decisions regarding their educational choices.

Case Presentation

The North Carolina Opportunity Scholarship Program, which provides annual scholarships for tuition and fees at an eligible private school, was established by the General Assembly in 2013. The program has since undergone several updates and modifications, all of which were based on legislative actions and public feedback. North Carolina also offers a Children with Disabilities Grant program and an Education Savings Account program for children with disabilities. The goal of these programs is to provide additional educational options for students in North Carolina.

In 2023, the General Assembly passed a significant expansion of the Opportunity Scholarship Program, making all Tar Heel State K-12 families eligible. While eligibility is open to all students, the Opportunity Scholarship Program maintains its original intent, ensuring low-income families have priority for a scholarship. The award amount of the Opportunity Scholarship is determined based on a family's household income and is calculated as a percentage of per-pupil public school spending, ranging from $3,000 to $7,000 for the 2024-25 school year.

The ESA program is intended for students with special needs who seek to enroll in an eligible private or home school or have the flexibility of co-enrolling at a public school and private or home school. The funding can be used for the costs associated with educating a child with a disability, including tuition, educational therapies, curricula, and other qualified expenses.

Recognizing the importance of parent outreach and supporting parents as they seek enrollment in a school for their child, the state administering agency contracted with a third party, PEFNC, to fulfill this role. PEFNC is a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting parents as they seek to find the best educational environment for their children. Their mission is to engage at the grassroots level, educate North Carolinians about educational options, and empower families to have a voice in their children's education.

Approach

To bolster outreach and assist families in navigating the various programs, PEFNC created the Parent Liaison Team (PLT). Composed of parents experienced in utilizing education choice options, the PLT conducts grassroots outreach throughout North Carolina to inform parents about available education freedom programs.

Parent Liaison Team

Philosophy: The PLT approach is founded on the expertise and passion of existing scholarship families, utilizing their knowledge to serve others.

Impactful Efforts: Members of the PLT undertake various responsibilities to raise awareness and engage parents. Key activities include:

- Reaching out to families that have expressed interest exploring alternative educational options
- Conducting informational sessions with schools and parent groups to educate them about educational options
- Helping families find an educational environment that best fits their child's needs
- Assisting families through the application processes of various educational options

Meaningful Messengers: Parents who have utilized scholarship options for their families have practical and relatable experiences that can be valuable for other parents interested in learning more about their family's options. Some parent liaisons have children who attend public charter schools, while others are enrolled in private schools using available scholarships. Each liaison possesses the experience needed to assist other parents in navigating these programs.

“As a parent liaison, I find this work important because of my experience with my two children. One of my children has a disability, and the other was having difficulties in the traditional setting, which just wasn't working for him. School choice options have greatly helped my family to really allow them to flourish. As a Parent Liaison, I want to make sure that other parents know that they have choice options and that they are not stuck in their assigned district.”

— CHARLONDA, PLT MEMBER

“For me, I was out there in a sea by myself and didn’t understand a lot [about the scholarships that were available]. I’m thankful I came across [the team at PEFNC]. [They have] been very helpful, answered a lot of questions, and helped me get his [scholarship].”

— ESA PARENT

Strength in Numbers: Fifteen parents are currently serving as official team members. Additionally, PEFNC reports more than 400 parent advocates have supported the PLT in a volunteer capacity by making family contacts, participating in media interviews and video campaigns, writing letters to the editor, attending events and school tours, or contacting legislators to share their perspectives on the impact of parental school choice on their lives.

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Challenges: Finding the right individuals to become Parent Liaisons and ensuring they have the necessary tools and knowledge to assist families effectively can present challenges. Examples of such barriers that needed to be addressed include:

- Identifying liaisons with the necessary background, skills, and compassion that understand the role is more than just customer service, but truly empowering families to find what is best for them.
- Selection of liaisons strategically located in different regions across the state and liaisons with availability during weekdays, weekends, and evenings.
- Continuous adjustments to liaison training to ensure they are up-to-date and fully understand the ever-changing educational landscape of the state, whether via the law or administrative rules.

Results

The impact of the PLT's efforts has been profound. Through their work, they have reached thousands of parents to facilitate informed decision-making and increase parental involvement in education throughout North Carolina.

Scholarship Assistance

Since its inception, the PLT has contacted over 15,000 parents and made almost

30,000

connections through emails, phone calls and text messages.

Event Outreach

The PLT team has reached out to over 5,000 parents with over

15,000

direct invitations to events to better inform families.

Impact by PLT Member

On average, each liaison...

reached 1,250 parents

and made 7,600 direct connections.

Looking Ahead

As North Carolina's choice programs continue to change and evolve, PEFNC is committed to expanding, empowering, and training its Parent Liaison Team. Through peer-to-peer support and personalized outreach, PEFNC is well-positioned to raise awareness, promote participation, and offer essential choice options to parents and families throughout the state, instilling a sense of hope for the future.