



Saving for college

Giving children and grandchildren
the opportunity of a lifetime

Offered through Wells Fargo Advisors

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Whether your children or grandchildren are toddlers or teenagers, it's only a matter of time before they leave the family home, probably as they head off to college. The cost of sending just one child to college for four years can be staggering, and tuition and fee hikes have regularly outpaced inflation. Rather than sending your children or grandchildren into the world with the burden of student-loan debt, you can save to help cover at least a portion, if not all, of their higher-education expenses.

The College Board Advocacy and Policy Center reported that over the past decade, college tuition and fees have rapidly increased. The table to the right demonstrates how average college costs would continue to increase at national average annual inflation rates based on a 10-year historical average.

Fortunately, parents who intend to cover or contribute to their children's education costs have many ways to save. If you've not yet looked into an education savings plan, your financial professional can help you choose among a variety of savings vehicles, including 529 plans, Education Savings Accounts (ESAs), and custodial accounts offered through Wells Fargo Advisors.

Estimated annual college costs		
	Public ¹	Private ¹
2026	\$27,180	\$62,260
2031	\$31,053	\$73,589
2036	\$35,478	\$86,979
2041	\$40,533	\$102,806

¹ Total yearly costs for in-state tuition, fees, books, and room and board (transportation and miscellaneous expenses not included). Base is 2025 – 2026 school year. Costs for all future years projected by Wells Fargo Advisors in November 2025 assuming a 2.7% national average increase per year for public and 3.4% for private (based on a 10-year historical average).

Source: Trends in College Pricing and Student Aid, collegeboard.org, November 2025.

Tax-advantaged options

With both 529 plans and ESAs, earnings may be tax-free as long as withdrawals are used to pay for qualified education expenses.

529 savings plans

Most states and the District of Columbia offer 529 college-savings plans. Most are national plans and are available to residents of any state, although roughly half of the states' plans offer in-state residents additional state-income-tax benefits. If considering an out-of-state 529 plan, be sure to weigh the tax implications.

529 plans allow tax deferral on account earnings within the plan; potential for tax-free distributions for qualified education expenses; no income limitations for participation; higher contribution limits than ESAs; minimal burden of investment decisions; and potential estate-planning benefits. These plans also provide flexibility surrounding changing 529 beneficiaries to other eligible family members as long as it is not a custodial 529. See additional details in IRS publication 970: Tax Benefits for Education.

529 plans offer no guarantees on investment returns, but — like a 401(k) — they let you choose an investment strategy from a particular plan's options. At times, an out-of-state plan may offer features that may be beneficial for your strategy — such as lower fees, different investment options, or the potential for more flexibility — that could outweigh the tax benefits of participating in your state's plan. Be sure to discuss and evaluate your options with your financial professional and tax advisor.

Please consider the investment objectives, risks, charges and expenses carefully before investing in a 529 savings plan. The official statement, which contains this and other information, can be obtained by calling your financial advisor. Read it carefully before you invest.

College savings plans offered by each state differ significantly in features and benefits. The optimal plan for each investor depends on his or her individual objectives and circumstances. In comparing plans, each investor should consider each plan's investment options, fees and state tax implication. Discuss these items with your tax advisor. Wells Fargo & Company and its affiliates do not provide tax or legal advice. This communication cannot be relied upon to avoid tax penalties. Please consult your tax and legal advisors to determine how this information may apply to your own situation. Whether any planned tax result is realized by you depends on the specific facts of your own situation at the time your tax return is filed.



ESAs

An ESA allows tax deferral on account earnings within the account and the potential for tax-free qualified distributions for elementary, secondary, and post-secondary education. The maximum annual contribution is up to \$2,000 per beneficiary.

Eligibility to contribute to an ESA is based on the contributor's modified adjusted gross income (MAGI). Single taxpayers whose MAGI is less than \$95,000 and joint taxpayers whose MAGI is less than \$190,000 can make the full \$2,000 nondeductible contribution. The allowable contribution is phased-out for single taxpayers whose MAGI is between \$95,000 and \$110,000 and for joint filers whose MAGI is between \$190,000 and \$220,000. If your MAGI exceeds these limits, you cannot contribute.

Investment-based college-savings programs come in many shapes and sizes. That's why a financial professional's insight and guidance is so valuable. He or she will help you choose a savings plan and can also help you select the plan's investment alternatives that fit your needs and risk tolerance.

For a list of qualified expenses for 529 plans or ESAs, refer to IRS Publication 970 at [irs.gov](https://www.irs.gov). Consult your tax advisor regarding state and local tax rules.

Federal Tax credits

The American Opportunity Credit provides a tax credit of up to \$2,500 of tuition and related expenses paid during any of the first four years of college for students pursuing a program leading to a degree or other recognized education credential. The credit starts to phase out at \$80,000 Modified Adjusted Gross Income (MAGI) for single filers and \$160,000 for joint filers. It is completely phased out at \$90,000 and \$180,000, respectively.

Lifetime Learning Credit. Unlike the American Opportunity Credit, the Lifetime Learning Credit can be taken for any year of postsecondary schooling and does not require at least half-time enrollment or that the coursework lead to a degree. The Lifetime Learning Credit maximum is \$2,000 per return, or 20% of qualified tuition and fees up to \$10,000. Income limitations will reduce the credit for joint filers with MAGIs more than \$160,000 and for single filers with more than \$80,000. Education tax credits are calculated on IRS Form 8863.

Taxable accounts

Rather than investing in an ESA or 529 plan, you may choose to save using a taxable account. If so, you'll have to decide whether to invest in your name or your child's name.

Investing in your name

To maintain maximum control over the assets in your college-savings account, invest in your own name. Under this arrangement, you may invest however you choose and give your child access to the account's assets when you decide to do so — if at all. You'll pay taxes on the account's earnings at your own marginal income tax rate.

Investing in your child's name

Tax law contains provisions that limit the effectiveness of investing in a child's name, but it may still make sense for parents willing to cede control over an account to a child. The standard deduction for a dependent who has only unearned income (no wages) is \$1,350 in 2026. Your child must pay taxes on any unearned income in excess of that amount, although rates vary, as described to the right.

The “kiddie tax”

The tax rules governing a dependent child's tax rates are known as the “kiddie tax rules.” After the initial \$1,350 deduction (assuming unearned income only), a dependent child younger than age 19 (or 24 for a full-time student) pays taxes on the next \$1,350 at his or her own tax rate, which is typically 10% (0% for long-term capital gains or qualified dividends). If the dependent child's account earns more than \$2,700, the excess is taxed at the higher of the parents' top marginal rate or the child's own rate. The “kiddie tax” rules do not affect children who are 18 or older and provide more than half of their own support (based on their own earned income).

Suppose your 12-year-old daughter has \$80,000 in an investment account that was built over the years through gifts from various relatives. You invest the money, and it generates \$3,600 in nonqualified dividends in 2026. Your daughter has no other earned or unearned income. If your top marginal tax rate is 35%, your daughter's tax liability on the interest income would be computed as shown below.

“Kiddie tax” example	
Investment income	\$3,600
Less: standard deduction	(\$1,350)
Taxable income	\$2,250
Second \$1,350 taxed at child's rate (10%)	\$135
Amount in excess of \$2,700 taxed at parent's rate (\$900 x 35%)	\$315
Total tax liability	\$450
Note: This example has been simplified for illustrative purposes. Actually, a side calculation is done on the child's return or the income is included on the parents' return and taxed at their top marginal bracket. For further explanation, consult your tax advisor.	

Custodial accounts

If you decide to invest in your child's name, you will probably do so in a custodial account. In such an account for a minor, an adult serves as custodian and holds supervisory powers over the investments.

Each state has statutes that govern the legal requirements of custodial accounts and conform to either the Uniform Gift to Minors Act (UGMA) or the Uniform Transfer to Minors Act (UTMA). The following policies apply to all custodial accounts:

- All gifts to minors are irrevocable, and the donor of the gifts retains no right to the property. Distributions should be used for the child's benefit. Unlike an ESA or 529 savings plan, the funds are not restricted to education expenses only. Custodial funds can be used to pay for education expenses that are not considered qualified expenses under the ESA or 529 rules.
- The custodian manages the investments, making decisions concerning buying and selling, reinvesting earnings, and so forth. He or she must act in the child's best interest and not for himself or herself.

- The account's ownership is in the minor's name and Social Security number. The custodian holds supervisory powers only. When the child reaches the age that custodianship ends, as specified by the state in which the account was created, the custodian is obligated to transfer assets to the child.
- Only one child may be named on a custodial account.

Taxes levied on a custodial account depend on your child's age and whether the account's income was generated through taxable or tax-free investments. The "kiddie tax" rules, as explained on page 5, may apply.



Make educated decisions

	529 savings plans	ESA	UGMA/UTMA	Savings Bonds
How much can you invest?	Perhaps as little as \$10 a month or as much as vendor allows; varies by state. Donor subject to annual gift tax exclusion of \$19,000 (in 2026) or five-year accelerated gift.	\$2,000 maximum annual contribution per child up to age 18 (over 18 if beneficiary has special needs).	Unlimited contributions, but donor should consider the \$19,000 annual gift-tax exclusion.	Up to \$10,000 per year of Series EE and I bonds electronically and an additional \$5,000 in paper Series I bonds bought with IRS tax refund (per Social Security number).
Who controls the account?	Account owner (not beneficiary).	Parent or other “responsible individual.”	The custodian until the minor reaches the age the custodianship terminates (varies by state).	Bond owner.
Tax treatment	Tax-deferred growth potential. Qualified withdrawals may be federal-tax-free. Earnings portion of distributions may be taxable in years the American Opportunity Credit or Lifetime Learning Credit is used if same expenses used to qualify for credit. Contributions may qualify for a state-income-tax deduction.	Tax-deferred growth potential. Qualified withdrawals may be federal-tax-free. Earnings portion of distributions may be taxable in years the American Opportunity Credit or Lifetime Learning Credit is used if same expenses used to qualify for credit.	While the child/student is under age 24 and a dependent, subject to “kiddie tax” rules. If child is over age 18 and has earned income greater than half his/her support, “kiddie tax” no longer applies.	Interest is taxable unless higher-education exclusion applies. See IRS Form 8815 for details. Interest income might not be tax-free in a year when American Opportunity Credit or Lifetime Learning Credit is used if same expenses used to qualify for credit.
Restrictions on use of money	For withdrawals to be qualified (federal tax-free), distributions must generally be used for the following: – Qualified education expenses at eligible post-secondary institutions, – Qualified expenses at registered apprenticeship programs, – Qualified expenses with enrollment at eligible elementary or secondary schools (up to \$20,000 annually in 2026), – Up to \$10,000 lifetime for qualified student loan repayment, or – Qualified post-secondary credentialing expenses.	For withdrawals to be qualified (federal tax-free), distributions must generally be used for the following: – Qualified education expenses at eligible post-secondary institutions, – Qualified expenses with enrollment at eligible elementary or secondary schools.	Must be used for the child’s benefit.	No restrictions. However, to qualify for interest exclusion, withdrawals must be used for qualified higher-education expenses and meet other requirements as per Form 8815.

Make educated decisions

	529 savings plans	ESA	UGMA/UTMA	Savings Bonds
Restrictions on use of money	If you are a designated 529 plan beneficiary, you may be eligible to have a direct rollover contribution made on your behalf from your 529 plan to a Roth IRA if certain conditions are met: – 529 must have been maintained for 15 years, – May not exceed the aggregate of contributions (and earnings attributable thereto) made more than five years before the date of the rollover, – May not exceed the \$35,000 lifetime limit, – Are subject to annual Roth IRA contribution limits, and the Roth IRA owner must have earned income at least equal to the amount of the rollover. MAGI limits do not apply. Since these rules are complex, contact your tax advisor for more details about this rollover option.			
Advantages	Anyone can make contributions. Account owner retains control. No family income restrictions. Can transfer to an eligible family member without penalty or to another qualified tuition program; once every 12 months if for the same beneficiary.	Anyone who is under the MAGI limits can make contributions subject to the overall limit. Can transfer account to eligible family member. Self-directed investment choices.	Anyone can make contributions. Withdrawals not restricted to qualified educational expenses. Possibly lower taxation on investment income than if held in parent's name. No family income restrictions.	Fixed rate of return. Guaranteed by the full faith and credit of the U.S. Government for the timely payment of interest and principal if held to maturity. Tax on interest income can be deferred until the earlier of redemption or maturity. It may be tax free if you qualify for the education exclusion.
Disadvantages	Tax and 10% penalty on earnings for nonqualified withdrawals. Investment options are limited to those offered by a particular plan. May only change investment options twice per calendar year or when changing beneficiary.	Tax and 10% penalty on earnings for nonqualified withdrawals. Not available to taxpayers with MAGIs over \$220,000 (married/joint filers) or \$110,000 (single) for 2026. Low contribution limit.	No tax deferral. Child gains complete control at age when custodianship ends (varies by state).	Low rate of return. Eligibility for interest exclusion begins phase-out for MAGIs above \$152,650 (married/joint filers) or \$101,800 (single) for 2026. Benefit of interest exclusion is limited to person(s) taking a dependency exemption for the student on Form 1040.



Start now

It's common to assume that saving will be easier in the future when you're earning more, but as your family and income grow, so do your expenses associated with your standard of living. If you wait until your kids or grandkids are closer to college age, you may find you've waited too long and might face the prospect of scaling back the family's finances in other ways to save for hefty tuitions, fees, and living expenses.

Also, when you start early, college savings may earn substantially more over time through the power of compounded growth. For example, suppose you start putting aside \$100 every month for an 8-year-old child. Assuming a 5% annual growth rate, you'll save \$15,592 by the time your child is ready for college but will have invested only \$12,000 out-of-pocket.

If you wait until your child is 15 to start saving, you'll have to put more money aside each month to save the same amount, and your out-of-pocket investment will be much greater. For example, at the same 5% annual growth rate, it would take \$400 per month to save \$15,566 in time for college, and you'd have invested \$14,400 out-of-pocket. This information is hypothetical and is provided for informational purposes only. It is not intended to represent any specific return, yield, or investment, nor is it indicative of future results.

How do you plan to meet the ever-rising costs of college? Contact your financial professional today to discuss your education funding options.

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