



Florida TaxWatch: School choice options a better bargain for state

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March 17, 2017

A recent report by Florida TaxWatch refutes one of the key arguments made by school choice opponents — namely, that charter and choice schools end up hurting traditional schools by diverting funding.

Further, the paper says that voters might be missing a larger part of the picture: how much taxpayer money is actually going to K-12 education.

The Florida Department of Education has reported a per-pupil appropriation of \$7,178 for the 2016-17 school year. The FLDOE touts historic funding levels of \$20.2 billion for the year, \$11.3 billion of which come from the state. But according to the analysis by Florida TaxWatch, those oft-invoked numbers overlook other money that is also spent on education.

Public schools in Florida draw money from a lot of sources. In 1973, the Florida Education Finance Program was established to manage the state's education funds and distribute them equitably across all districts in recognition of varying geographic and financial situations.

For fiscal 2015-16, FEFP calculates that the per-pupil expenditure was \$7,090. However, public schools get funding for other programs that the FEFP calculations do not take into consideration, TaxWatch says, including capital projects and debt service. When taking these additional funding sources into account, TaxWatch says that the true cost of public education in Florida was \$10,308 per K-12 student in 2015-16.

It's not just Florida that under-reports the amount of money that gets funneled into education. A 2010 Cato Institute report found that real education spending in five of the nation's largest metro areas was 44 percent higher than officially reported.

“Most citizens don't have any idea how much is spent per child in public schools,” wrote Cato policy analyst Adam Schaeffer. “When asked how much was spent in their state, only about 7 percent of Floridians guessed a figure that was close to or higher than the [National Center for Education Statistics] figure of about \$9,800 for that year. Sixty-three percent thought their state was spending \$6,000 or less.”

However, the TaxWatch analysis shows that funding for charter school students in 2015-16 was significantly closer to the FEFP's calculations, at \$7,307. That's \$3,000 less per student compared with funding for students in traditional public schools.

TaxWatch found that the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program is even cheaper for the state.

The program gives corporations tax credits in return for funding scholarships that allow low-income students to pay for private school tuition, up to a set yearly cap. The FLDOE reports that the amount spent per scholarship student was \$5,677 for 2015-16.

The discrepancy in funding received by public schools and charters can be explained in part by the range of services both offer. The funding formula for public schools includes money for things such as transportation and programs for English-language learners, which not all charters provide.