

EducationNext

Fact-Checking the Sun-Sentinel on School Choice

By [Jason Bedrick](#)

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Over Thanksgiving weekend, Florida's *Sun-Sentinel* [editorialized](#) in favor of the Florida teachers union's [lawsuit](#) against the Sunshine State's most popular [school choice law](#). Regrettably, the editorial is rife with misunderstandings, misleading comparisons, and outright errors that leave uninformed readers with a false impression about the law. The *Sun-Sentinel* owes its readers a detailed retraction.

The Phantom Menace

The errors begin in the first sentence:

Florida's courts must review the state's school voucher program after this year's massive expansion by the Legislature.

First, a point of clarification: Florida has a [scholarship tax credit \(STC\) law](#), not a [voucher program](#). The latter is a government-administered program that allocates government revenues to students to cover private school tuition. By contrast, STC laws are privately administered programs that rely on the voluntary contributions of corporate taxpayers who receive tax credits in return. As the U.S. Supreme Court [ruled](#), these funds never become public funds because they do not "come into the tax collector's hands."

The *Sun-Sentinel* also has a peculiar definition of "massive" – the word it used to describe an "expansion" that included not a single additional dollar in available tax credits. In reality, the [legislation](#) merely raised the income eligibility cap for first-time recipients starting in 2016 from 185 percent of the federal poverty line to 260 percent, with priority given to lower-income students.

Later in the editorial, the *Sun-Sentinel* correctly notes that the amount of tax credits automatically increases over time, but that provision was added years ago. Nothing in this year's legislation changed the tax credit cap or the rate of growth. Additionally, the editorial failed to accurately describe the rate of increase:

The program began in 2002-03 with a limit of \$50 million, targeting poor students. This year, the limit is \$358 million. Because the limit increases by 25 percent each year, the program could spend \$904 million by 2018-19, according to a Florida House analysis.

The "[Florida House analysis](#)" that the editorial cites concerns a bill that did not pass. That bill would have raised the tax credit cap, but it did not become law. Assuming maximum growth, the credit cap will be \$874 million in 2018-19, not the \$904 million mentioned on page 7 of the moot report.

And while that figure may sound large without any context, it's less than 3.5 percent of the roughly [\\$25 billion](#) that the state of Florida currently spends on the public school system. The current level of tax credits is only 1.4 percent of Florida's total public school spending.

Comparing Apples and Orangutans

Rather than put the scholarship tax credit law in the context of Florida's overall education spending, the *Sun-Sentinel* compares it to... Iowa.

No state has a bigger voucher [sic] system. Last year, Florida spent \$286 million on just 2.7 percent of all students. Iowa spent \$13.5 million on 2.6 percent of its students.

Setting aside the fact that the state of Florida did not "spend" even one red penny on the scholarships, this comparison is misleading. Do the editors at the *Sun-Sentinel* really believe that Iowa has as many students as Florida? If so, why haven't they decried the fact that Florida spends more than \$25 billion on its public schools while Iowa spends barely [\\$5 billion](#)? Perhaps because Florida has [more than five times](#) the number of students?

Comparing apples to apples, fewer than 10,500 students received tax-credit scholarships in Iowa last year compared to more than 69,000 in Florida. And while the tax-credit scholarships are larger in Florida than Iowa – about [\\$4,660](#) on average versus about [\\$1,090](#) on average – they are dwarfed by the more than [\\$10,000 per pupil](#) spent on average at Florida public schools.

The Case of the Missing Savings

The *Sun-Sentinel* also grossly misstates the fiscal impact of the STC law, portraying savings as a deficit.

The editorial notes that the vice president of Step Up for Students, Florida's largest scholarship organization, "argues that... studies show the program to be saving the state money." This is no mere "argument," but rather an incontrovertible fact. In 2010, the Florida legislature's respected Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability [estimated](#) that the state of Florida saves \$1.44 for every \$1 in decreased tax revenue as a result of the STC law. But the editorial (incorrectly) contradicts this fact:

As for the supposed savings, the calculations rely on information supplied by schools that accept vouchers [sic]. And while a legislative analysis this year projected a short-term savings, it also projected a longer-term \$30 million deficit.

This time, the *Sun-Sentinel* editors not only relied on a moot report regarding a dead bill, they also misread it. Page 15 of the [report](#) notes that the proposed legislation would have reduced tax revenue by \$30 million per year, but that figure only states the impact on *revenue*. The law also impacts *expenditures*. On the very same page, the report explains that “under both current and proposed law, the [Florida Education Finance Program] savings from the program are expected to exceed the revenue losses due to tax credits through FY 2018-19.” Had the bill passed, the savings would have been reduced, but there still would have been savings.

Moreover, neither analysis relies on “information supplied by [private] schools.”

An Ostrich Evaluates the Evidence of Success

The editorial claims “there is no compelling evidence the program is succeeding.” But more and more families apply each year and [more than 95 percent](#) of scholarship recipients rate their chosen schools as “excellent” or “good.”

Supporters also point to high test scores, but the editorial claims “there is no way to accurately compare voucher [sic] students with Florida public school students” because the latter are required to take the state achievement test while the former are required to take one of several [national achievement tests](#), such as the Stanford Achievement Test or PSAT. The *Sun-Sentinel* argues:

Absent that accountability, parents who praise the program don’t know with certainty if their children are doing better. And the assessment shows that white voucher students from more affluent families do better — just as in public school.

Yet again, the *Sun-Sentinel* fails to provide context. Florida’s scholarship students are among the most disadvantaged – the average household income of scholarship families was only [\\$24,067](#) this year, 4.5 percent above the poverty line – yet on math and read tests, they still [score near the national median](#) among all students from all income ranges.

This is all the more impressive since the latest Florida Department of Education [report](#) found that “public school students who ultimately became program participants are more likely to be the relatively lower-performing students in their schools, a fact that has not changed over time.”

Moreover, while the researcher tasked with tracking the achievement of scholarship students was unable to make clear apples-to-apples comparisons with Florida public school students last year, he was able to do so in years past when Florida’s public school students also took the nationally norm-referenced Stanford Achievement Test. In 2011, Dr. David Figlio [found](#) that scholarship students slightly outperformed Florida public school students in reading and math, though the differences were not statistically significant in all categories. Since previous [research](#) indicated that Florida’s public schools were improving as a result of the increased competition, Figlio

notes that “the correct interpretation of the findings in this report are that students participating in the program have kept pace with the improvements in the public schools associated with the [STC] Program.”

The editorial also casts doubt on claims that the STC law benefits minorities:

If minorities are benefiting, why do black students score 20 points lower than white students on those tests?

The real question is why the *Sun-Sentinel* omitted the crucial context: the black-white test gap in the public schools. It’s not possible to make a direct comparison, given that the two groups of students take different tests, but the disparity in the Florida public school system is significant. According to Florida’s Annual Measure of Objectives [[Excel file](#)], in 2014, 70 percent of white students scored satisfactory or above in both reading and math while among black students, 39 percent scored satisfactory or above in reading and 43 percent scored satisfactory or above in math.

A Comedy of Errors

The *Sun-Sentinel* misunderstands Florida’s scholarship tax credit law, ignores or misreads the savings reported by multiple government analyses, fails to provide appropriate context, and disregards compelling evidence of success. Citizens depend on media outlets to provide accurate information with the appropriate context. The *Sun-Sentinel* should retract its editorial and correct the record.

Jason Bedrick is an education policy analyst at the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom.