

Research & Commentary: Combining, Expanding School Choice Programs Would Be Another Big Step Forward For Florida Students

Tim Benson

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Streamlining, Expanding Choice Programs The Next Logical Step For Florida Education

An [education bill](#) making it's way through the Florida Senate would, among other things, streamline the state's five education choice programs by combining them into two education savings account (ESA) programs.

The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program (TCS) and Hope Scholarship program for bullied students would be merged into the Family Empowerment Scholarship (FES) voucher program, which would then transition to an ESA program. While TCS and the Hope Scholarship were previously funded via tax credits through private donors, the new combined FES program were entirely be funded out of state coffers. Eligibility for participation in the program would also be increased to families with household incomes up to 300 percent above the federal poverty level.

Meanwhile, the Gardiner Scholarship Program ESA and the John M. McKay Scholarships for Students with Disabilities Program voucher would be merged into the McKay-Gardiner Scholarship Program.

Turning the non-ESA programs into ESAs will also make available more education options that parents can use to customize and tailor to meet the unique needs of each individual child.

Florida's choice programs have been a great success for participating students. A [2019 study](#) from the Urban Institute, [expanding on previous research](#), found TCS students participating in the program for at least four years are 43 percent more likely to enroll in a four-year college and 20 percent more likely to graduate than their public school peers. Meanwhile, a [March 2021 study](#) from the School Choice Demonstration Project at the University of Arkansas also showed that low-income students and students with disabilities had “had demonstrated dramatic [academic] gains compared to their similarly-disadvantaged peers nationally” due to the state's education choice programs.

Further, a [2020 working paper](#) from the National Bureau of Economic Research found TCS also provides serious benefits for the state's public school students. These students attending public schools who faced more competition from private schools utilizing the TCS program saw their test scores and suspension rates improve and their absenteeism decrease, with students from “comparatively lower socioeconomic background(s)” being “most positively affected.”

TCS is also saving the state a considerable sum of money. A 2016 EdChoice study estimating the fiscal effect of TCS found the program had saved the state government, state and local taxpayers, and local school districts from \$372 million to \$549 million cumulatively through 2013–14. That works out to \$1,122 to \$1,658 per participating student.

Copious other empirical research on school choice programs has shown these programs offer families improved access to high-quality schools that meet their children’s unique needs and circumstances. Moreover, these programs improve access to schools that deliver quality education inexpensively. Additionally, these programs benefit public school students and taxpayers by increasing competition, decreasing segregation, and improving civic values and practices.

Students at private schools are also less likely than their public school peers to experience problems such as alcohol abuse, bullying, drug use, fighting, gang activity, racial tension, theft, vandalism, and weapon-based threats. There is also a strong causal link suggesting private school choice programs improve the mental health of participating students.

It is probably for these reasons, and also because teacher unions have repeatedly played politics with school closings during the COVID-19 pandemic in direct conflict with students’ best interests, that ESAs are more popular with parents than ever before. Polling done by EdChoice released in December 2020 found 81 percent support for ESAs among the general public and 86 percent among current school parents, the highest level of support the program has received in the organization’s eight years of polling on the issue. This represents a 4-percentage point increase over 2019. These findings are mirrored in the American Federation for Children’s seventh-annual National School Choice Poll, released in January 2021, which saw 78 percent support for ESA programs.

A 2018 survey of 14,000 TCS parents by EdChoice revealed that 92 percent of parents are satisfied with the program, including 89 percent who are “completely satisfied.” Another 89 percent were satisfied with their choice school, including 72 percent completely satisfied and only 9 percent dissatisfied. More than 70 percent of parents responded their children would be attending a public school if not for FTC.

“Florida’s tax-credit scholarship program is helping a large number of disadvantaged students gain access to an education that is a better fit for them,” the survey notes. “Students receiving tax-credit scholarships ... tend to be less advantaged, less affluent, and more racially and ethnically diverse than the general K–12 population in Florida.”

A February 2019 survey of Florida voters by the Foundation for Excellence in Education found 55 percent of respondents think the state should have a universal education savings account program where all students, regardless of income level, should be eligible. Half of Florida private school leaders plan on expanding seating capacity over the next four years, totaling around 30,000 more available seats.

With more than 160,000 children making use of the state’s five current school choice programs, Florida is the national leader in school choice. Sunshine State parents are familiar with the concept of these programs, as well as the benefits they entail to children. They are ready for the expansion of these programs, not just in terms of funding, but in what education services they are

allowed to provide their children with those expansions. Combining and expanding these school choices programs is definitely the best step forward for public education in the state of Florida.

The following documents provide more information on voucher programs and school choice.

Surveying Florida Scholarship Families: Experiences and Satisfaction with Florida's Tax-Credit Scholarship Program

<https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/2018-10-Surveying-Florida-Scholarship-Families-byJason-Bedrick-and-Lindsey-Burke.pdf>

This EdChoice survey authored by Jason Bedrick and Lindsey Burke explores the preferences and experiences of parents and guardians of Florida children using the Florida Tax-Credit Scholarship Program. As the largest-ever survey of participants in a private school choice program, it represents some of the strongest evidence to date of the views and educational priorities of parents exercising private school choice.

Exploring Florida's Private Education Sector

<https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/ExcelinEd.Opportunity.PrivateSchoolChoice.FloridaPrivateSchoolSurvey.pdf>

This first-of-its-kind survey of Florida private school leaders by EdChoice and the Foundation for Excellence in Education finds private schools in Florida are affordable, they have the capacity to serve many more students, and capacity could be further expanded if more tuition assistance were to be made available to families.

Effects of Scaling Up Private School Choice Programs on Public School Students

<http://papers.nber.org/tmp/97079-w26758.pdf>

This working paper from the National Bureau of Economic Research finds the continued expansion of Florida's Tax Credit Scholarship Program produced modestly larger benefits for students attending public schools that had a larger initial degree of private school options, measured prior to the introduction of the program. These benefits include higher standardized test scores and lower absenteeism and suspension rates. Effects are particularly pronounced for lower-income students.

The Effects of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program on College Enrollment and Graduation: An Update

https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/99728/the_effects_of_the_florida_tax_credit_scholarship_program_on_college_enrollment_and_graduation_0.pdf

In this update to a 2017 Urban Institute study, authors Matthew Chingos, Tomas Monarrez, and Daniel Kuehn find students participating in the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program are 99 percent more likely to enroll in a four-year college, and 56 percent more likely to graduate, than their public school peers.

The Effects of Statewide Private School Choice on College Enrollment and Graduation: Evidence from the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program

<https://www.heartland.org/publications-resources/publications/the-effects-of-statewide-private-school-choice-on-college-enrollment-and-graduation-evidence-from-the-florida-tax-credit-scholarship-program>

This study from Urban Institute scholars Matthew Chingos and Daniel Kuehn shows Florida's

Tax Credit Scholarship Program boosted college enrollment for participating students by 15 percent, with students enrolled in the program for four or more years seeing a 46 percent hike.

Fiscal Effects of School Vouchers: Examining the Savings and Costs of America’s Private School Voucher Programs

<https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Fiscal-Effects-of-School-Vouchers-by-Martin-Lueken.pdf>

In this EdChoice study, Director of Fiscal Policy and Analysis Martin F. Lueken examined the fiscal impact of voucher programs across America—from their inception through fiscal year 2015—to determine whether they generated costs or savings for state and local taxpayers. Lueken found these programs generated cumulative net savings to state and local budgets of \$3.2 billion. This represents a \$3,400 savings per voucher recipient.

The Tax Credit Scholarship Audit: Do Publicly Funded Private School Choice Programs Save Money?

<https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Tax-Credit-Scholarship-Audit-by-Martin-F.-Lueken-UPDATED.pdf>

In this audit, EdChoice Director of Fiscal Policy and Analysis Martin Lueken updates previous work examining the fiscal effects of private school choice programs on state governments, state and local taxpayers, and school districts. Lueken’s report analyzes savings from tax credit scholarship programs, which allow individuals and businesses to reduce their state tax liability by making a private donation to a nonprofit organization that provides scholarships for children to attend private schools of their choice. This audit looks at 10 tax credit scholarship programs operating in seven states between 1997 and 2014. These 10 programs serve 93 percent of all students participating in tax credit scholarship programs nationwide.

Protecting Students with Child Safety Accounts

<https://www.heartland.org/publications-resources/publications/protecting-students-with-child-safety-accounts>

In this *Heartland Policy Brief*, Vicki Alger, senior fellow at the Independent Women’s Forum and research fellow at the Independent Institute and Heartland Policy Analyst Tim Benson detail the prevalence of bullying, harassment, and assault taking place in America’s public schools and the difficulties for parents in moving their child from an unsafe school. Alger and Benson propose a Child Safety Account program, which would allow parents to immediately move their child to a safe school— private, parochial, or public— as soon as parents feel the school their child is currently attending is too dangerous for their child’s physical or emotional health.

A Win-Win Solution: The Empirical Evidence on School Choice (Fourth Edition)

<http://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/A-Win-Win-Solution-The-Empirical-Evidence-on-School-Choice.pdf>

This paper by EdChoice details how a vast body of research shows educational choice programs improve academic outcomes for students and schools, saves taxpayers money, reduces segregation in schools, and improves students’ civic values. This edition brings together a total of 100 empirical studies examining these essential questions in one comprehensive report.

2019 Schooling in America Survey: Public Opinion on K–12 Education, Busing, Technology, and School Choice

<https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/2019-9-Schooling-in-America-by-Paul-Diperna-Andrew-Catt-and-Michael-Shaw-1.pdf>

This annual survey from EdChoice reports polling results based on a nationally representative sample of the general public, with more robust samples of parents, current public school teachers, Millennials and Generation Z than in previous editions. The survey asks standard questions about schooling experiences and educational choice reforms, as well as hot-button K–12 subjects that seem to polarize lawmakers and advocates, including inter-district busing, teacher protests and children’s use of technology.

The Public Benefit of Private Schooling: Test Scores Rise When There Is More of It

<https://object.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/pa830.pdf>

This *Policy Analysis* from the Cato Institute examines the effect increased access to private schooling has had on international student test scores in 52 countries. The Cato researchers found that a 1 percentage point increase in the share of private school enrollment would lead to moderate increases in students’ math, reading, and science achievement.

The Effects of School Choice on Mental Health

https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3272550

This study from Corey DeAngelis at the Cato Institute and Angela K. Dills of Western Carolina University empirically examines the relationship between school choice and mental health. It finds that states adopting broad-based voucher programs and charter schools witness declines in adolescent suicides and suggests that private schooling reduces the number of times individuals are seen for mental health issues.

The Public Benefit of Private Schooling: Test Scores Rise When There Is More of It

<https://object.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/pa830.pdf>

This *Policy Analysis* from the Cato Institute examines the effect increased access to private schooling has had on international student test scores in 52 countries. The Cato researchers found that a 1 percentage point increase in the share of private school enrollment would lead to moderate increases in students’ math, reading, and science achievement.

Nothing in this *Research & Commentary* is intended to influence the passage of legislation, and it does not necessarily represent the views of The Heartland Institute. For further information on this subject, visit [School Reform News](#), The Heartland Institute’s [website](#), and [PolicyBot](#), Heartland’s free online research database.

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