

August 26, 2016

## More Florida students using scholarship programs

By Heather Kays,

Despite ongoing legal battles, the number of students using two school choice programs in Florida continues to rise, approaching the 100,000-student mark.

According to Step Up For Students, a nonprofit organization that administers scholarships for both programs, 92,011 students had enrolled in 1,665 private schools for the 2016-17 school year using Florida Tax Credit Scholarships, as of Wednesday. These scholarships are limited to low-income families whose incomes fall under state guidelines. That's an increase of 13,347 students from last year and represents the largest one-year gain since the start of the program in 2002.

Also as of Wednesday, 5,844 students with special needs such as autism and Down syndrome received Gardiner Scholarships for 2016-17, the program's third year. That's up 24.6 percent from last year.

"We grew 17 percent over last year, which is much faster than the state as a whole," Patrick Gibbons, public affairs manager for Step Up For Students, told Watchdog.org. "Even large school districts like Hillsborough, Pinellas and Duval saw significant growth. The growth shows that parents want options and options are here to stay. Last year about 1.5 million children across the state were attending schools (public, private, virtual, home education) outside their assigned neighborhood school. The Tax Credit Scholarship and Gardiner Scholarship programs are two available options among many here in Florida."

Doug Tuthill, president of Step Up For Students, says he is proud to be part of a growing, bipartisan movement to strengthen public education.

"Florida is a national leader in expanding educational opportunity, and the latest numbers again show that parents appreciate the power to access additional options that can best serve their children," said Tuthill, in a press release.

However, litigation potentially threatens school choice programs in the state.

For example, in the *McCall vs. Scott* lawsuit, the Florida Education Association (FEA) and several other groups sued the state of Florida in 2014 in hopes of ending the Tax Credit Scholarship program. The FEA is expected to appeal to the state Supreme Court after an appellate court upheld the program earlier this month.

The lawsuit argues the program violates two sections of the Florida Constitution. One states, "no revenue of the state or any political subdivision or agency thereof shall ever be taken from the public treasury directly or indirectly in aid of any church, sect, or religious denomination or in aid of any sectarian institution." And the other states, "adequate provision shall be made by law for a uniform, efficient, safe, secure, and high quality system of free public schools that allows students to obtain a high quality education and for the establishment, maintenance, and operation of institutions of higher learning and other public education programs that the needs of the people may require."

Officials from Step Up For Students say the number of students participating in both the Florida Tax Credit Scholarships program and Gardiner Scholarships program will likely increase slightly this year as last-minute applicants go through the approval process and after AAA Scholarship Foundation, the other organization in the state able to administer the scholarships, releases its official numbers.

"The lawsuits have had little to no impact on enrollment numbers," Gibbons told Watchdog.org. "Of course we, and our scholarship parents, are concerned about the lawsuit. Parents have chosen these schools and many believe they've made a choice that is now benefiting their children. They want to keep their scholarships and they'd much prefer that the plaintiffs spend their time and energy trying to help disadvantaged children; not remove their educational options."