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Study: Vouchers help boost graduation rate

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Florida students who took part in the state's largest school voucher program were more likely to enroll in college, and graduate with bachelor's degrees, than similar youngsters who remained in public schools, according to a new study released Monday.

The study looked at students who took part in the state's Tax-Credit Scholarship Program, which helps pay private-school tuition for children from low-income families. The program is serving nearly 100,000 students this year, making it the largest school-choice program in the nation.

The study of more than 16,000 students found that those who entered the program to attend a private high school did the best, as far as college, though students attending private elementary and middle schools did better than similar peers — matched on family income, race and academic skills, among other factors — in public schools. The study was published by the Urban Institute.

Sixty four percent of the scholarship high school students enrolled in college within two years of high school graduation, for example, compared with 54 percent of the public school group, the study said. Twelve percent earned a bachelor's degree compared with 10 percent of the public school group. Fifty seven percent of the younger group enrolled in college compared with 51 percent of

the public-school group, the study found, and 10 percent earned a bachelor's degree compared with 9 percent of the public-school students.

The study, an updated look at work first done in 2017, found "a positive effect on college-going and graduation rates," the authors concluded.

Republican leaders are looking to boost support for Florida's four school scholarship programs, all of which pay for children to attend private school. These programs are controversial but popular with many parents, as well as school-choice advocates.

The new study will likely be used to help make the case for more funding when the Florida Legislature convenes in March.

Authors Matthew M. Chingos, Tomas Monarrez and Daniel Kuehn noted that the study does not "tell us what makes a private school choice program work or which students benefit most."

They wrote that many students who take a scholarship spend only one (35 percent) or two years (23 percent) in private school and then return to public schools. They also said that as the scholarship program has expanded it has taken in more students from "lower-middle-income families" and the results should be viewed with that in mind.

"We must continue to study private school choice to better understand what works, when, and why," they wrote.

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