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## More poor students using vouchers to attend PBC private schools

By Andrew Marra

The number of low-income children using vouchers to attend Palm Beach County's private schools has more than doubled in four years, as more companies steer money into a state scholarship program in exchange for tax credits.

More than 2,000 students attended county private schools this year with the help of the needs-based vouchers, a marked increase from 2011 when just 854 students used them, according to data provided by Step Up For Students, the non-profit that administers the scholarships.

The growth is roughly in line with the 14-year-old program's rate of expansion statewide. And its administrators say the steady increase is likely to continue, as more corporate money flows into the scholarships and more families in poor households learn of their availability.

"There is more awareness, there is more money, and there is more choice overall everywhere," said Ron Matus, a spokesman for Step Up For Students. "There are options exploding all over the place."

Records show the vast majority of families use the vouchers to enroll in religious schools, a trend that draws the ire of the state teachers union and other critics. Detractors call the program an end-run around Florida's constitutional ban on state financing for religious programs.

Legislators and then-Gov. Jeb Bush created the tax credit scholarship program in 2001. This school year, Step Up For Students plans to spend \$406 million on need-based vouchers for about 75,000 students statewide.

The program is not related to the state's now-defunct Opportunity Scholarships voucher program for students in low-performing schools, which was struck down by the Florida Supreme Court in 2006.

But as it has grown, the program has received increased scrutiny. Last year, the Florida Education Association and other education and advocacy groups sued to shut it down. The lawsuit was dismissed on technical grounds.

In Palm Beach County this year, 2,045 students used the program to attend 49 schools, records show.

The county school that drew the most scholarship students was Boca Raton Christian School, with 153 last school year. Second was Trinity Christian Academy west of Lantana, with 146.

### Scholarships top \$5,000

To qualify, students must come from households with incomes no higher than 185 percent of the federal poverty rate, which varies depending on family size. For a four-person family, that means a household income of \$44,863 or less.

Students who qualified this year won annual scholarships

worth \$5,272. In many cases, that covered only a portion of the tuition at the schools, leaving families to make up the difference.

Families taking advantage of the vouchers are mostly minorities, although the percentage of white students using them has risen slightly in recent years. Countywide, 42 percent of voucher students this year were black, while 26 percent were Hispanic. Twenty-two percent were non-Hispanic whites, according to scholarship statistics.

Proponents call the program a needed alternative for poor children who struggle in their local public schools but whose families can't afford private schools.

Roline Powe, a single mother in Belle Glade, says the scholarships changed the lives of three of her children.

Powe said her daughter was being bullied at her elementary school when she learned about the scholarship program. She won a voucher to cover most of the cost of enrolling her daughter at Glades Day School two years ago. She liked the experience so much that she enrolled two of her other children as well.

There are few bullying problems at the school, she said, and her children are performing better and endure far fewer days of standardized testing than in the local public schools.

"It's one of the best decisions that I could have made for my family," said Powe, who is a substitute teacher at Lake Shore Middle School in Belle Glade.

### Critic doubts benefits

Money donated by corporations to the scholarship program is deducted from their state tax bill. As more corporations write checks, state revenue to spend on other programs falls by an equal amount.

Step Up For Students argues, though, that the scholarships ultimately save the state money, because a \$5,272 scholarship to send a child to a private school costs less than the roughly \$7,200 that Florida spends to educate a public school student.

But Mark Pudlow, a spokesman for the Florida Education Association, said that logic doesn't work when relatively small numbers of students leave.

"If you lose a half-percent of your student population, it doesn't mean that you close the school or you have all kinds of savings," he said.

Pudlow also said that students in private schools don't take the same standardized tests as public school students, making it difficult to measure whether they are faring better or worse.

Matus, of Step Up For Students, said studies have shown students who leave public schools with the vouchers tend to see gains on their test scores.

The scholarship program receives more applicants than it has money to accommodate. Despite that, lawmakers are loosening

the eligibility requirements so more middle-class families can qualify for partial scholarships.

But a requirement that poor families take precedence may mean that no one can take advantage of the expanded eligibility rules in the near future. One way or another, though, the program is projected to keep growing.

“There is more awareness,” Matus said. “Every year, the cutoff on the application deadline gets moved up earlier and earlier.”

### Top voucher schools

More than 2,000 low-income students now attend Palm Beach County private schools using tax credit scholarships. Here are the five schools with the most scholarship students.

1. Boca Christian School, Boca Raton — 153 students
2. Trinity Christian Academy, suburban Lake Worth — 146 students
3. Berean Christian School, Royal Palm Beach — 129 students
4. Garden of the Sahaba Academy, Boca Raton — 125 students
5. R.J. Hendley Christian Community School, Riviera Beach — 121 students

[Source: Step Up For Students](#)

### Tax-Credit Scholarship Students in Palm Beach County Private Schools

Here are the private schools that educate the most low-income students attending with tax-credit vouchers.

School Name	City	FTC <sub>s</sub>
Boca Raton Christian School	Boca Raton	153
Trinity Christian Academy	Lake Worth	146
Berean Christian School	West Palm Beach	129
Garden Of The Sahaba Academy	Boca Raton	125
RJ Hendley Christian Community School	Riviera Beach	121
Sacred Heart School	Lake Worth	105
Atlantic Christian Academy Of The Palm Beac	West Palm Beach	100
Palm Beach Bilingual School	Riviera Beach	88
Saint Luke Catholic	Palm Springs	68
Lake Park Baptist School	Lake Park	64
Lake Worth Christian School Society Inc.	Boynton Beach	58
Greenacres Christian Academy	Lake Worth	56
Glades Day School	Belle Glade	52
Torah Academy Of Boca Raton	Boca Raton	52
Daughter Of Zion Jr Academy	Delray Beach	47
Ephesus Junior Academy	West Palm Beach	47
Saint Juliana	West Palm Beach	47
Saint Vincent Fener	Delray Beach	45
Suncoast Christian Academy	Lake Worth	38
West Palm Beach Junior Academy	West Palm Beach	37
Jupiter Christian School	Jupiter	36
Saint Joan Of Arc	Boca Raton	34
Hillel Day School Of Boca Raton	Boca Raton	32
Haverhill Baptist Day School	West Palm Beach	29
Saint Jude Catholic School	Boca Raton	29
Spanish River Christian	Boca Raton	29
Weinbaum Yeshiva High School	Boca Raton	27
St. Clare Catholic School	North Palm Beach	25
The Shepherds School	Pahokee	25
Oakstone Academy Palm Beach Corporation	West Palm Beach	24
Saint Ann Catholic School	West Palm Beach	23
Pope John Paul II High School	Boca Raton	22
Bar Fergs Academy Inc.	Delray Beach	18
Gap Christian Academy	Pahokee	15
Arthur I Meyer Jewish Academy	Palm Beach Gardens	14
Atlantis Academy	West Palm Beach	14
Cardinal Newman High School	West Palm Beach	13
Grandview Preparatory School	Boca Raton	12
Trinity Christian School Of P.B Gardens	Palm Beach Gardens	9
Donna Klein Jewish Academy	Boca Raton	8
The Benjamin School	North Palm Beach	6
S.A.T. Virtual Resource Center	West Palm Beach	5
Jupiter Academy	Jupiter	4
New Horizons Christian Academy	West Palm Beach	4
Coates Learning Center Inc.	West Palm Beach	3
Academic High School For The Arts	Boca Raton	2
Sea Star	Boca Raton	2
The Learning Foundation Of Florida	Royal Palm Beach	2
Unity For Kids	Lake Worth	1

Source: Step Up For Students

Chart shows distribution of voucher students in Palm Beach County. Source: Step Up For Students