

Florida leads nation as school voucher programs expand

By **KENRIC WARD**
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A record 210,000 U.S. students are using public funds to attend private K-12 schools, and Florida leads the nation with more than 60,000 of them, a new study reports.

Nearly all of the children participating in the voucher-style programs come from low- or middle-income families, or are students with special needs.

Florida, a school-choice pioneer under Gov. Jeb Bush, currently awards:

- John McKay Scholarships to 22,861 disabled students at 1,050 private schools.
- Tax-Credit Scholarships to 37,998 low-income pupils attending 1,180 private campuses.

Both programs have grown steadily, with the Tax-Credit Scholarship enrollment jumping nearly 10 percent in the past year alone.

The McKay scholarship, by far the largest of its type in the country, has grown every year since it began in 2000.

In all, the Alliance for School Choice inventoried 27 private-school voucher programs nationally, with total enrollment up 20,000 students in the past year.

“This is something of a turning point,” said Malcom Glenn, a co-author of the Alliance’s *School Choice Yearbook*. “We’re seeing these programs being embraced on a bipartisan level.”

Recently, Indiana’s new statewide voucher system that quickly enrolled the maximum of 4,000 low- and moderate-income students was upheld by the courts. Next year, the student cap rises to 15,000 and then is lifted altogether.

Noting, with irony, that a state Supreme Court ruling restricted Florida’s voucher program on the grounds that the Constitution requires “equal” education, Glenn said choice initiatives serve to further that goal.

“The public school system was set up to be equal, but it’s not,” he said. “You get closer to true equality through choice.”

The academic inequality in Florida’s K-12 education is illustrated each year by the state’s grading process, where hundreds of public schools pull down C’s, D’s or F’s.

“We have to look at providing equality, irrespective of

the system. Results matter. Systems are less important than outcomes,” Glenn said.

Florida Gov. Rick Scott is inclined to agree. Without committing to any particular program, he says, “I support parent choice because parents know what is best for their children.”

Among the findings of the Alliance report:

- Seven new programs were enacted in the country last year, including a new program in Indiana that boasted the highest first-year enrollment ever for a voucher plan.
- Of the new programs, there are four voucher programs, one scholarship tax credit program, one individual tuition tax credit, and one education savings account program — a new program that lets parents use education dollars on a variety of educational tools.

- Ten of the 27 school choice programs are specifically tailored to serve children with special needs, benefiting almost 30,000 students nationwide.

Unions such as the National Education Association resist such programs, complaining that they take public funds from public schools and put them in private hands.

But proponents respond that the dollars simply follow the student, empowering families to make educational choices.

Advocates also note that vouchers for special-needs and low-income students absolve public schools from having to serve some of the most cost-intensive pupils.

Glenn’s report reveals that vouchers are valued at or, in most cases, below standard per-pupil funding — so public schools incur no net monetary loss.

And in terms of academic performance, the Alliance reported that students receiving tax-credit scholarships in Florida score better on standardized tests after leaving public schools.

Likewise, Harvard University education researcher Caroline Hoxby found that test scores at “sending” schools in Milwaukee increased with the introduction of vouchers there.

“It’s all about the competition,” Glenn said.

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