

Tax Scholarship Students Keep Up with Students Nationally, Says Report

By Allison Nielsen

Low-income students participating in Florida's tax credit scholarship program are performing at the same level as their national peers, according to a report released Tuesday.

An independent evaluation conducted by Northwestern University's Institute for Policy research director David Figlio took a closer look at Florida students participating in the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program.

The program, started in 2001, gives scholarships to low-income families to help with K-12 private school tuition and fees or a transportation scholarship to attend out-of-district public schools.

In order to create the report, Figlio collected test score data from private schools participating in the FTC Program in real time. This year is the sixth year program participants' test score data were collected, and the fifth year where the data collection occurred in real time.

Figlio analyzed the students' performance on norm-referenced tests -- tests where each test-taker receives a score that compares the student to others who have taken the test.

The 46-page report's findings for the 2012-2013 school year were similar to previous years' results: students participating in the program gained a year's worth of learning in a year's worth of time.

Figlio found most of the participants in the program tended to come from the lower-performing public schools. Students also tended to be the lowest-performing students in their prior school. These students' tendency to choose to participate in the FTC program has become stronger since the program's inception.

When it comes to subject gains in private schools, not all private schools yield the same achievement results.

Nonreligious schools have greater gains in mathematics

than religious schools, says the report. Catholic private schools, on the other hand, have greater reading gains than do nonreligious schools, but Catholic private schools have weaker math gains than nonreligious schools generally.

When it comes to test-score gains, the report found there was no correlation between scores and a school's student-teacher ratio.

There was, however, a relationship between gains and the length of the school year -- private schools with school years longer than 180 days had more significant gains than schools with fewer than 180 days in the school year.

Step Up For Students, which administers the Florida Tax Credit scholarship program, has issued nearly 400,000 scholarships since 2002 and expects to serve approximately 67,000 students throughout Florida for the 2014-15 school year.

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