

Step Up For Students



MAY 2021

OFFICE OF POLICY AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Florida is a national leader in educational choices and Step Up For Students helps to deliver several of those options. Today, Step Up offers five scholarships to meet the diverse needs of Florida's public, private and home education students.

MORE CHOICES

For a quarter century, Florida has been a national leader in expanding choice. Forty-eight percent of students in PreK-12 – nearly 1.7 million – [now attend something other than their zoned neighborhood schools](#), up from 10 percent 30 years ago. This includes both district and non-district options. Consider:

- **Charter schools.** Florida opened the door to charter schools in 1996, and now [ranks No. 3 nationally in both enrollment and number of schools](#). In 2018-2019, Florida had 313,586 charter school students.
- **Private school choice.** Florida has the most diverse array of private school choice in America. The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship for low-income students, created in 2001, now serves about 100,000 students each year. Florida also has the McKay Scholarship for students with disabilities; the Family Empowerment Scholarship for low- and middle-income students; and the Hope Scholarship for bullying victims.
- **Education savings accounts.** In 2014, Florida created the Gardiner Scholarship, an education savings account (ESA) for students with special needs. ESAs give parents the resources and flexibility to customize education for their children. The Gardiner Scholarship, now the nation's largest ESA, will serve 18,000+ students this year.
- **Florida Virtual School.** FLVS was a pioneer when it was created in 1997, and in the midst of the pandemic, it is as cutting edge as ever. It now serves more than 200,000 students each year, and [it boosted capacity this year](#) so it could serve up to 2.7 million students.
- **Voluntary Pre Kindergarten.** Created by constitutional amendment in 2002, VPK now serves about 170,000 students each year, [80 percent of them in private pre-schools](#).
- **District choice programs.** Florida school districts are major drivers of choice, offering magnet schools, career academies, dual enrollment, IB programs and more. In the Miami-Dade school district, more than 70 percent of students are now in choice programs.

BETTER OUTCOMES

Florida's expansion of choice coincides with rising student achievement. It is tough to parse out which factors led to that progress, but there is clear evidence students in choice programs are outperforming their peers in public schools, and that competition is spurring gains in public schools. Consider:

- **Education Week rankings.** [Florida now ranks No. 3 in the nation in K-12 achievement](#), and has ranked in or near the Top 10 for a decade.
- **Math and reading scores.** [Florida now ranks No. 1, No. 1, No. 3 and No. 8 on the four core tests of the National Assessment of Educational Progress](#), once adjusted for demographics. NAEP is considered the gold standard for standardized tests.
- **Advanced Placement.** Florida now ranks [No. 3 in the percentage of graduating seniors who've passed AP exams](#). FL has a higher rate of low-income students than every state but one in the Top 10.
- **Graduation rates.** Florida's high school graduation rate was [52 percent in 1998](#). It was [87 percent in 2019](#).
- **Scholarship outcomes.** FTC students are up to 43 percent more likely than their public school peers to attend four-year colleges, and up to 20 percent more likely to earn bachelor's degrees, according to the [Urban Institute](#). Students on scholarship four or more years are up to 99 percent more likely to attend four-year colleges and up to 45 percent more likely to earn bachelor's degrees.
- **Charter school outcomes.** Students in Florida charters are more likely than their district peers to graduate from high school, persist in college, and earn more money, according to this [high quality research](#).
- **Competitive effects.** As the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program grew, test scores rose, suspensions fell and absentee rates dropped in the public schools most affected by the competition, according to a [2020 study](#) published by the National Bureau of Economic Research. A [2008 study](#) found Florida's McKay Scholarship had similar impacts on students with disabilities in public schools.