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Private School Choice Enrolls a Half-Million Kids, & Growing; Florida, Wisconsin Have Top-Rated Programs, New Report Finds

By Kate Stringer



Nearly a half-million students are enrolled in private school choice programs, about 45,000 more than in 2016-17, according to a new report from the American Federation for Children.

The report, “[2017-18 School Choice Guidebook](#),” examines 26 states, Puerto Rico, and Washington, D.C., where private school vouchers, tax credit scholarships, education savings accounts, and/or individual tax credits are available. It ranked Florida as No. 1 among states with tax credit scholarship programs and highlighted Wisconsin as having the best voucher program.

Nationwide, there are 54 private school choice programs, enrolling nearly 488,000 students, the report found. Scholarships awarded to these students averaged \$5,400 a year, and 21 scholarship programs were reserved for special-needs children.

Halli Faulkner, national policy director at the federation, said she hopes state legislators will use the top-ranked states as models for crafting their own private school choice options. “We want to provide a tool that is not just interesting but is also useful to states in terms of thinking about how can they improve existing programs or create new high-quality programs,” Faulkner said.

The D.C.-based nonprofit, which advocates for school choice and was founded by now-Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, gave high marks to private school choice

programs that allow for broad student eligibility, large scholarships, and certain measures of accountability like standardized testing. States received points for requiring participating private schools to administer and report test scores, conduct background checks for teachers, report financial data, allow for a large number of students to participate but prioritize low-income children if enrollment is limited, and offer large scholarships, with growth over time.

Last year’s report awarded points for requiring schools to comply with federal nondiscrimination policies, but that element was removed this year because “ALL schools have to comply with the federal regs, whether or not states put that language in their statutes,” Faulkner wrote in an email to *The 74*. But a clause in Title IX exempts religiously affiliated schools from having to comply with federal policies that don’t conform to their beliefs — for example, protections for LGBT students against discrimination.

Florida’s tax credit scholarship program received the highest ranking out of 18 programs nationwide, scoring top marks in categories like required academic testing, background checks, and financial reporting. Florida’s program has the largest enrollment in the country, with 108,000 students participating last year. About \$631 million was given in donations in 2017. The program serves students from low-income backgrounds, and DeVos has heralded it as a national model. This year, Florida also created the [Hope Scholarship program](#), which provides private school tuition assistance for students who are bullied.

Wisconsin’s Racine Parental Choice Program earned the highest ranking out of 11 voucher programs across the states. It received top scores for having no cap on enrollment, limited barriers to new schools, and background checks for teachers. The program enrolled 3,000 students and spent nearly \$22 million in 2017.