

FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Scholarship Programs

ACCOUNTABILITY REPORT



December 15, 2012

Submitted as required by:
Section 1002.39(6)(f)2., Florida Statutes
Section 1002.395(9)(n)2., Florida Statutes

Office of Independent Education and Parental Choice
Improving K-12 Educational Choice Options

Introduction

This report is submitted in accordance with Sections 1002.39(6)(f)2., and 1002.395(9)(n)2., Florida Statutes, which require the Department of Education to annually, by December 15, report to the Governor, the President of the Senate, and the Speaker of the House of Representatives the actions of the Department with respect to implementing accountability in the scholarship programs, any substantiated allegations or violations of law or rule by an eligible private school under this program concerning the enrollment and attendance of students, the credentials of teachers, background screening of teachers, and teachers' fingerprinting results and the corrective action taken by the Department of Education.

In addition to Sections 1002.39 and 1002.395, Florida Statutes, governing the McKay and Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Programs, respectively, Section 1002.421, Florida Statutes, establishes accountability measures for private schools participating in these programs. State Board Rule 6A-6.0970, Florida Administrative Code, related to the McKay Scholarship Program and State Board Rule 6A-6.0960, Florida Administrative Code, related to the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program, clarify and establish requirements for private school and student participation in the state scholarship programs and establish procedures and roles for the Department of Education and Commissioner of Education. State Board Rule 6A-6.03315, Florida Administrative Code, related to private school scholarship compliance, codifies program related definitions and compliance requirements.

This report will focus on the actions taken by the Department to implement accountability measures in the scholarship programs in accordance with the above named statutes and rules and is divided into three parts.

Part I presents an account of the Department's actions in monitoring the compliance of participating private schools with scholarship program requirements. Specifically, this section of the report focuses on the compliance renewal process and the enforcement of renewal deadlines specified in State Board Rule 6A-6.03315, Florida Administrative Code. Also included are a brief summary of the application process for new participants and a review of the Department's actions related to the continued adherence of compliance requirements by participating private schools.

Part II discusses the activities undertaken by the Department to enforce existing accountability measures such as the fingerprinting requirement for private school staff and contracted personnel, the norm-referenced testing of Florida Tax Credit Scholarship students, the Department's site visits to randomly selected participating private schools, the complaint and inquiry process, and a summary of the Department's established communication measures and outreach activities.

Part III explains the Department's ongoing actions regarding State Board of Education Rules, and legislative changes.

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Part I: Scholarship Program Compliance

Compliance Renewal Process

Sections 1002.39(6)(d) and 1002.395(9)(g), Florida Statutes, state that the Department of Education shall require and retain an annual, notarized, sworn compliance statement by participating private schools certifying compliance with state laws. Additionally, participating private schools are required by Section 1002.421(2)(e), Florida Statutes, to annually complete and submit to the Department a notarized scholarship compliance statement certifying that all school employees and contracted personnel with direct student contact have undergone background screening pursuant to s. 943.0542, F.S.

The compliance reporting requirements are specified in the Scholarship Compliance Form which is referenced as Form IEPC SCF-1 in State Board Rule 6A-6.03315, Florida Administrative Code, related to Scholarship Program Compliance.

One of the primary ways in which the Department implements accountability measures for private schools is through the Compliance Renewal Process. The Compliance Renewal Process is the process of annually submitting a Scholarship Compliance Form and any required supporting documentation. A renewing school is defined in rule as a private school that had scholarship students during the current or previous school year.

Renewing schools are required to submit a Scholarship Compliance Form, Private School Annual Survey, and fiscal soundness documentation (if in operation for less than three years) to renew participation for the next school year. Pursuant to State Board Rule 6A-6.03315, Florida Administrative Code, once every third year a renewing private school will be selected for full renewal. This means that the private school must submit all applicable compliance documentation for review such as the school's health and safety inspection reports and the owner's fingerprint report in addition to the standard compliance documentation.

For the 2012-13 school year, this Compliance Renewal Process began in November 2011, when the 2012-13 Scholarship Compliance Form was posted on the School Choice Website at www.floridaschoolchoice.org. At that time, private schools participating in the state scholarship programs were able to begin submitting renewal documentation in order to be eligible to participate for the subsequent school year.

Renewal Deadlines

State Board Rule 6A-6.03315, Florida Administrative Code, requires renewing private schools to postmark and mail the Scholarship Compliance Form by March 1 of each year to be eligible to participate for the subsequent school year. Following timely submission of the Scholarship Compliance Form, the participating private school must resolve any outstanding compliance issues, including the submission of supporting compliance documentation, on or before May 1 in order to remain eligible to participate in the scholarship programs.

Notifications

The Department began notifying participating private schools about the compliance deadlines as early as October 2011. The Department's efforts to notify participating private schools about the Compliance Renewal Process for the 2012-13 school year included a letter and checklist sent by mail notifying the schools of the documentation needed to renew, regular posting of information on the School Choice website, and regular e-mail notifications, in addition to maintaining ongoing communication through the customer service call center and regional manager.

Private School Eligibility

Renewing private schools that failed to meet the compliance renewal deadlines established in rule were issued a Notice of Proposed Action denying the school's eligibility to participate for the upcoming school year. The Notice of Proposed Action was issued in the form of an Administrative Complaint executed by the Commissioner of Education.

Five schools were denied eligibility to participate for the 2012-2013 school year for failure to meet the compliance renewal deadlines.

New Schools

State Board Rule 6A-6.03315, Florida Administrative Code, defines a new school as a private school that did not have scholarship students during the current or previous school year. New schools may submit the Scholarship Compliance Form at any time; however, the Department does not allow the school to enroll scholarship students until the school has adequately demonstrated compliance with all program requirements.

Upon receipt of the signed and notarized Scholarship Compliance Form, new schools have 60 days to submit supporting documentation and resolve any outstanding compliance issues with the Department. Supporting documentation includes fiscal soundness documentation (if in operation for less than three years), the Private School Annual Survey, applicable health and safety inspection reports, ethics policy and procedures, and the owner's fingerprint report. If any outstanding compliance issues have not been resolved after 60 days, the Department administratively closes the private school's application. The application can be reopened at any time during the same school year by request of the private school.

A total of 256 new private schools began participation with the scholarship programs for the period of December 1, 2011 to November 30, 2012.

Continued Adherence to Compliance Requirements

In addition to processing compliance renewals each spring and new school applications as they are submitted, the Office of Independent Education and Parental Choice monitors private schools for adherence to scholarship program compliance requirements throughout the school year.

Sections 1002.421(2), 1002.421(4), 1002.3(7), 1002.39(8), and 1002.395(8), Florida Statutes, establish that the inability of a private school to meet the requirements of these sections shall constitute a basis for the ineligibility of the private school to participate in a scholarship program. The types of violations related to these sections and actions taken by the Department are described below.

Maintaining a Physical Location

Sections 1002.395(8)(d) and 1002.39(8)(d), Florida Statutes, require private schools that participate in a state scholarship program to maintain a physical location in Florida where scholarship students regularly attend classes and have regular and direct contact with the private school teachers.

In addition, the private school's physical location, where the regular and direct contact occurs, must meet applicable state and local health, safety, and welfare laws, codes, and rules. If the physical location cannot, for whatever reason, meet the health and safety requirements applicable to all private schools then the private school cannot provide services to scholarship students at that location.

During the period of December 1, 2011 to November 1, 2012, the Commissioner of Education issued Administrative Complaints immediately suspending the eligibility of five private schools for failure to maintain an approved physical location. Reasons for suspension included failure to provide sufficient health inspection documentation or fire inspection documentation, and schools that had changed locations without updating documentation. Three schools provided the necessary documentation to continue participation in scholarship programs and two schools remain suspended from program participation until satisfactory documentation is obtained and submitted to the Department, or appeals processes have been concluded.

Demonstrating Fiscal Soundness

Section 1002.421(2)(f)1., Florida Statutes, requires a participating private school in operation for less than three years to demonstrate fiscal soundness and accountability by obtaining a surety bond or letter of credit for the amount equal to the scholarship funds for any quarter and filing the surety bond or letter of credit with the Department. Private schools with fiscal soundness documentation filed for an amount less than the amount of scholarship funds the school received for any one quarter during the 2011-2012 school year were issued Notices of Noncompliance requiring these private schools to obtain a new surety bond or letter of credit for the appropriate amount.

During the period of December 1, 2011 to November 1, 2012, the Commissioner of Education had issued Administrative Complaints immediately suspending the eligibility of three private schools for failure to demonstrate fiscal soundness. However, all three schools provided the necessary documentation to continue participation in scholarship programs and their suspensions were rescinded.

Failure to Return Funds

In accordance with Rule 6A-6.0970 (5)(d), Florida Administrative Code (F.A.C), private schools are responsible for the return of all scholarship funds to the Department that were received in error. If the Department identifies scholarship funds that should be returned, a letter is sent to the school requesting the return of funds and providing the procedure to be followed if the private school believes that return of funds is being requested in error.

Failure to return the funds due back to the Department or failure to provide a sufficient explanation for how the school claimed funds that were erroneously obtained within 30 days, results in the initiation of noncompliance procedures. During the period of December 1, 2011 to November 1, 2012, the Commissioner of Education had issued Administrative Complaints suspending the eligibility of 23 private schools for failure to return funds. Of the 23 schools, 21 were rescinded and two remain suspended from program participation until satisfactory documentation is obtained and submitted to the Department, or the appeals processes have been concluded.

Agreed-Upon Procedures

Section 1002.395(8)(e), Florida Statutes, requires a participating private school, receiving more than \$250,000 in Florida Tax Credit (FTC) Scholarship funds during the fiscal year July 1 to June 30, to file an accountability report. This accountability report focuses on the use of the scholarship money and the financial procedures and controls in place at the school. That report, filed in the form of Agreed-Upon Procedures, is to be completed by an independent Certified Public Accountant (CPA), and submitted to the Scholarship Funding Organization (SFO).

There were 25 private schools that received more than \$250,000 in FTC scholarship funds during the 2011-2012 school year. Of the 25 schools, six schools submitted a completed report, 17 schools submitted an incomplete report, and two did not submit a report. The two schools that did not submit a report were issued a Notice of Noncompliance and of the two schools, one was suspended for failure to comply. The school's suspension was rescinded once the Department received information that satisfactory documentation was obtained and submitted.

Fraudulent Activity

Sections 1002.39(7) and 1002.395(11)(c), F.S., provide that the Commissioner of Education may immediately suspend payment of scholarship funds if it is determined that there is probable cause to believe that there is fraudulent activity on the part of the private school or if there is an imminent threat to the health, safety, or welfare of the students. In addition, Sections 1002.39(7)(a) and 1002.395(11)(a), F. S., provide that the Department may revoke a private school's participation in the scholarship program if it is determined that the private school has failed to comply with the provisions of that section.

During the period of December 1, 2011 to November 30, 2012, the Commissioner of Education issued Administrative Complaints immediately suspending the eligibility of five private schools for fraudulent activity. The Department entered into a settlement agreement with the five schools and therefore the schools' suspension from the scholarship program(s) has been rescinded.

Additionally, two schools were denied eligibility into the scholarship programs due to submitting fraudulent compliance documentation.

Part II: Existing Accountability Measures

Private School Employee Fingerprinting

Section 1002.421(2)(i), Florida Statutes, states that a participating private school must require each employee and contracted personnel with direct student contact, upon employment or engagement to provide services, to undergo a state and national background screening. The school must then deny employment to or terminate an employee who fails to meet the screening standards under Section 435.04, Florida Statutes.

As of July 1, 2007, fingerprints must be submitted electronically via a live scan device and must be retained by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement. The retained fingerprints are searched against all incoming arrest fingerprint submissions in the Applicant Fingerprint Retention and Notification Program (AFRNP). Any matches are reported to the private school.

Private schools certify compliance with the employee and contracted personnel fingerprint requirement when they submit the signed and notarized Scholarship Compliance Form. The form includes a question which reads:

Have all employees and contracted personnel with direct student contact submitted their fingerprints to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement for a state and national background screening in accordance with Section 1002.421(2)(i), Florida Statutes?

In addition to the question, pursuant to Section 1002.421(2)(e), Florida Statutes, a certified statement is included on the Scholarship Compliance Form and states:

By signing below, I hereby certify compliance with all relevant state laws including the requirement for all private school employees and contracted personnel with direct student contact to have undergone a background screening pursuant to s. 943.0542, F.S.

Private schools unable to answer the question positively or who fail to submit a signed and notarized Scholarship Compliance Form are not eligible to participate in the state scholarship programs.

The Department has continued its efforts to notify private schools about this requirement through the Scholarship Programs Newsletter and detailed instructions in the Scholarship Compliance Renewal Packet.

The Department also continues to work in conjunction with the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) to direct participating private schools to register with the Volunteer and Employee Criminal History System (VECHS) Program. Private schools can submit electronic fingerprints for their employees and contracted personnel and will directly receive both state and federal background check results. The Department requires all new participating private schools to supply their VECHS entity number prior to becoming eligible to participate. In addition, a renewing private school must continue to maintain a valid VECHS entity number to remain eligible to participate.

Private School Site Visits

Sections 1002.39(6)(f)1. and 1002.395(9)(n)1., Florida Statutes, required the Department of Education to conduct random site visits to private schools participating in the McKay and Florida Tax Credit (FTC) Scholarship Programs. The purpose of the site visits is solely to verify the information reported by the school concerning the enrollment and attendance of students, teacher credentials, background screenings, and fingerprint results of teachers. The Department was limited to three random site visits to McKay Scholarship schools and seven random site visits to FTC Scholarship schools.

The Department conducted site visits for the 2011-2012 school year in October 2011. Ten private schools were formally notified of the upcoming site visit via certified letter. Each site visit was conducted by two staff members from the Office of Independent Education and Parental Choice with the aid of the Site Visit Procedure Manual developed by the Department. The manual identifies procedures to be followed by Department staff conducting the site visits. The manual includes statutory references for each private school requirement and background information and copies of supporting compliance documentation submitted by the selected private schools.

Department staff members were guided in their site visits by the following questions:

In accordance with Sections 1002.42(3)(a)2.a. and b., 1003.22(1), 1003.22(4), and 1003.23(2), Florida Statutes, does the school have appropriate documentation regarding the enrollment and attendance of students?

In accordance with Section 1003.23(2), Florida Statutes, does the school maintain an enrollment register which shows the absence or attendance of each student enrolled for each school day of the year in a manner prescribed by the State Board of Education?

In accordance with Sections 1002.42(2)(c) and 1002.421(2)(i), Florida Statutes, does the school have a file for fingerprint cards or Level 2 clearances for all employees and contracted persons?

In accordance with Section 1002.421(2)(h), Florida Statutes, did the school provide evidence that they employ or contract with teachers who hold baccalaureate degrees or higher, have at least three years of teaching in public or private schools, or have special skills, knowledge or expertise that qualifies them to provide instruction in the subjects taught as mandated?

The ten schools selected for a site visit were not able to demonstrate compliance with the statutes related to program documentation at the time of the site visit. Reasons included incomplete documentation of teacher qualifications and background screening results, insufficient evidence of required student records, and missing or insufficient compliance documentation for the physical location of the school.

At the conclusion of each site visit, the private schools were provided with a copy of the Site Visit Review Form which documented any required corrective action. If warranted, Notices of Noncompliance were issued to establish a timeline for correcting the deficiencies. Schools able to comply with requirements within the specified timeline continue in the programs uninterrupted. Schools failing to comply by the established deadline are issued an Administrative Complaint executed by the Commissioner of Education that suspends the school's eligibility to participate in the scholarship programs. Schools failing to comply with final deadline requirements have their participation in scholarship programs revoked.

However, all ten schools visited were able to supply the required documentation and were able to continue uninterrupted participation in the scholarship programs.

Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Norm-Referenced Assessment

Section 1002.395(8)(c)2., Florida Statutes, states that a private school participating in the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program must demonstrate academic accountability to the parent for meeting the educational needs of the student by annually administering or making provision for students participating in the scholarship program to take one of the nationally norm-referenced tests identified by the Department of Education. A participating private school must report a student's scores to the parent and to the University of Florida, the independent research organization selected by the Department of Education.

Private schools participating in the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program certify compliance with this academic accountability requirement when they submit the signed and notarized Scholarship Compliance Form. The form includes a question which reads:

Does the school demonstrate academic accountability pursuant to Section 1002.395(8)(c)2., Florida Statutes, by administering or making provisions for scholarship students to take a nationally norm-referenced test identified by the Department of Education and reporting the student's scores to the parent and the independent research organization selected in Section 1002.395(9)(j), Florida Statutes?

Private schools that are unable to answer positively to this question are not eligible to participate in the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program.

Notification of Testing Requirement

The Department maintains a page on the School Choice Website describing the testing requirement and listing the approved assessments. A detailed Technical Assistance Paper is also posted on this page and includes an extensive question and answer section. The Department notified private schools of this requirement in the September 2011, December 2011, January 2012, February 2012, March 2012, May 2012 and June/July 2012 Scholarship Program Newsletters.

Submission of Test Scores to Independent Research Organization

Section 1002.395(9)(j), Florida Statutes, requires the Department to select an independent research organization to which participating private schools must report the scores of participating students on the national norm-referenced tests administered by the private school. Dr. David Figlio is the Project Administrator for the organization selected. Dr. Figlio is currently associated with the University of Florida. A research contract was finalized in September 2007 and has been renewed annually since July 1, 2009; the most recent renewal being on June 11, 2012.

Dr. Figlio directed the collection of test scores from the 2011-12 school years. He works closely with the state's Scholarship Funding Organizations to contact participating private schools and request the submission of test scores from eligible scholarship students. The Department included a notice regarding test score submission for the 2011-12 school year in the Scholarship Program Newsletters.

In September 2012, Dr. Figlio provided the Department with a list of 69 private schools that had not submitted complete test scores. Sixty-six of the 69 schools were still active participants in the program at the submission of Dr. Figlio's list. Subsequent to the 2011-2012 school year, each school was contacted several times by phone and mail by both Dr. Figlio and the Department. Included in the notices from Dr. Figlio was a reminder that the Department would issue Notices of Noncompliance to schools that had not submitted test scores. On August 28, 2012, the Department issued Notices of Noncompliance to the 66 schools on the list provided by Dr. Figlio.

At the time of the filing of this report, 62 of the 66 schools have become compliant with the testing requirements. The department is continuing administrative action against the remaining four noncompliant schools.

Identification of Approved Tests

Section 1002.395(9)(i), Florida Statutes, requires the Department of Education to maintain a list of nationally norm-referenced tests identified for purposes of satisfying the testing requirement. The Office of Independent Education and Parental Choice collaborated with the Office of Assessment and School Performance to identify assessments that met the criteria listed below:

1. Internal consistency reliability coefficients of at least 0.8
2. High validity evidenced by the alignment of the test with nationally recognized content standards, as well as specific evidence of content, concurrent, or criterion validity
3. Norming studies within the last 5 to 10 years, with norming within 5 years being preferable
4. Serves as a measure of K-12 student achievement in core academic areas

As a result, the following norm-referenced assessments were approved by the Department of Education for use during the 2012-13 school year:

1. Basic Achievement Skills Inventory-Comprehensive Version
2. Comprehensive Testing Program 4 (CTP 4)
3. Educational Development Series (EDSERIES), Forms G and H
4. EXPLORE®
5. Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS)-Core Battery, Forms A and B
6. Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS)-Complete Battery, Form C
7. Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS)-Core Battery, Form C
8. Iowa Assessments-Core Battery, Form E
9. Iowa Tests of Educational Development® (ITED®), Forms A and B
10. Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement-Second Edition, Comprehensive Form (KTEA-II)
11. Measures of Academic Progress (MAP)-Goals Survey Tests
12. Metropolitan Achievement Tests, Eighth Edition (METROPOLITAN8) -Short Form
13. PLAN®
14. PSAT/NMSQT®
15. REDIStep
16. Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition (Stanford 9)
17. Stanford Achievement Test, Tenth Edition (Stanford 10)- Basic Battery
18. Stanford Achievement Test, Tenth Edition (Stanford 10)-Abbreviated Battery
19. TerraNova (CTBS/5)- Basic Battery, Forms A and B
20. TerraNova, Second Edition (CAT/6)-Basic Battery, Forms C and D
21. TerraNova, Third Edition (TerraNova 3)
22. Woodcock-Johnson III Tests of Achievement, Extended Battery

Complaint and Inquiry Summary

Sections 1002.39(6)(c) and 1002.395(9)(f), Florida Statutes, require the Department of Education to establish a process by which individuals may notify the Department of any violation by a parent, private school, or school district of state laws relating to program participation. To comply with this section, the Office of Independent Education and Parental Choice assigned a position to fulfill the duties of a complaint specialist. The complaint specialist is responsible for receiving the initial complaints via e-mail or telephone through the toll-free information hotline and assisting the complainant in completing and submitting the formal complaint form.

When a signed formal complaint form is received, it is reviewed by the Department for legal sufficiency. A complaint is legally sufficient if it contains ultimate facts that show that a violation of this section or any rule adopted by the State Board of Education may have occurred. In accordance with law, formal complaints found legally sufficient either have an inquiry opened or the complaint is referred to the appropriate organization for investigation.

The Department's complaint and inquiry process is codified in State Board Rule 6A-6.0960, Florida Administrative Code, Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program, and State Board Rule 6A-6.0970, Florida Administrative Code, McKay Scholarship Program, and tracked through an administrative function on the School Choice Website. Below is the complaint and inquiry summary for the period of December 1, 2011, to November 30, 2012:

Action	Total
Legally Sufficient – Inquiry	28
Not Legally Sufficient	13
Total Signed Complaint Forms Received	41

A total of 28 legally sufficient formal complaints were submitted to the Department during the time period noted above. Inquiries were opened for 28 of the formal complaints and 23 of the 28 opened inquiries have been resolved either by the subject demonstrating compliance with program requirements or by the Department requiring the school to take corrective action. Five inquiries remain open at this time.

The three legally sufficient formal complaints were referred to the Office of Inspector General for investigation. Two of the three complaints referred to the Office of Inspector General remain open at this time.

Rule 6A-6.0970 affecting the John M. McKay Scholarship for Students with Disabilities Program also provides the Department with the option of performing a site audit/inspection to obtain more information related to an inquiry.

Communications

The Department of Education works to ensure that relevant communications related to scholarship program requirements and student eligibility reach participating private schools and parents of scholarship students in a timely and efficient manner. Dissemination of knowledge related to program requirements is an integral aspect of the Department's accountability measures. Private schools are notified of compliance deadlines and participation requirements by phone, e-mail, and regular mail. Parents are notified of program deadlines and participation requirements in many of the same ways. The established methods of communication from the Department are outlined below.

Toll-Free Hotline

As required by Sections 1002.39(6)(a) and 1002.395(9)(e), Florida Statutes, the Office of Independent Education and Parental Choice operates a toll-free hotline with two full-time staff and four part-time staff. There are two customer service representatives who are fluent in Spanish. Customer service representatives are available to answer incoming questions and concerns and refer involved issues to the appropriate staff. During the period of December 1, 2011, to November 30, 2012, the Customer Service Center recorded responses to an average of over 2,400 live phone calls and voicemails per month. Customer service representatives are also utilized to make pro-active calls to participating private schools reminding the schools of approaching compliance deadlines.

Lastly, the Department has been using an automated call tree on the toll-free hotline since September 2008. The call tree is updated periodically so that callers are able to select English or Spanish prompts and receive recorded answers to commonly asked questions. Parents may choose to hear information such as how to apply for a McKay Scholarship, how to check the status of an application, or a list of important program deadlines. Private schools may choose to hear instructions for applying to participate in a scholarship program or a list of important program deadlines. All callers may select to speak to a representative or leave a message at any time.

Regional Managers

The Office of Independent Education and Parental Choice employs six (6) Regional Managers. The Regional Managers are in place to maintain scholarship program files for the participating private schools. This includes the annual, notarized, sworn compliance statement certifying compliance with state laws required by the Department as outlined in Sections 1002.39(6)(d) and 1002.395(9)(g), Florida Statutes. Based in Tallahassee, each Regional Manager is in charge of maintaining files for specified areas of the state. Compliance documentation for each school is reviewed by a specific Regional Manager in order to facilitate communication and increase accuracy and efficiency for participating private schools in the process of demonstrating compliance.

During the period of December 1, 2011, to November 30, 2012, the six (6) Regional Managers collectively handled, on average, over 1,500 live phone calls and voicemails per month. Regional Managers also respond to e-mails from private schools, parents, and school districts. Our records indicate they logged, on average collectively, over 2,700 e-mails per month.

School Choice Website

The School Choice Website (www.floridaschoolchoice.org) provides detailed information about the scholarship programs and participation requirements for both private schools and students.

Private schools are able to log in as administrators and view their compliance status and the date the Scholarship Compliance Form and Private School Annual Survey were received by the Department. In addition, messages are posted as deadlines approach, links to statutes are provided, and technical assistance documents and presentations are available for download in PDF format.

Parents that choose the private school McKay Scholarship option by enrolling their student in a participating private school are also able to login securely to the website and view information such as their student's fee schedule and scholarship amount. Parents are also able to view a payment checklist and update contact information. The parent login educates parents about the McKay Scholarship Program and encourages them to be involved in their student's education and the school choice option they have selected.

Intent Confirmation Letters

In addition to providing information through the School Choice Website, the Department mails every parent an Intent Confirmation Letter after the parent files intent for the McKay Scholarship Program. The letter documents much of the information provided on the website including the parent's intent confirmation number, instructions for checking the status of a student intent, and information on the available options for eligible McKay Scholarship students including selecting a participating private school or contacting the public school district to request public school transfer options.

Parents were able to file intent for the 2011-12 school year beginning February 1, 2011. Since this date, an average of over 3,000 McKay Student Intents were filed each month and Intent Confirmation Letters mailed to parents each week.

Newsletters

A Scholarship Program Newsletter was distributed via e-mail each month to participating private schools during the 2011-12 school year; newsletters are distributed via e-mail in an effort to reduce cost. Newsletters are also posted and archived on the scholarship program website in PDF format. Each Scholarship Program Newsletter contains reminders of upcoming events and deadlines, articles about Department procedures related to scholarship program participation and compliance, helpful hints for successful demonstration of compliance, and notices of new requirements. Contact information and a chart of McKay Scholarship Program deadlines are also included in each newsletter.

Published Technical Assistance Papers

The Department of Education has published Technical Assistance Papers (TAPs) on a variety of topics to detail specific private school compliance requirements. Each TAP includes a section of commonly asked questions and answers, statutory references, and contact information. The TAPs are posted on the School Choice Website and e-mailed to participating private schools upon their release. There are currently TAPs available regarding the Norm-Referenced Assessment, Private School Fingerprinting Process, and Restrictive Endorsement procedures. Further technical assistance is also provided to participating private schools through private school newsletters, which are sent to the schools electronically each month.

Outreach Activities

In the past year, the Department has been invited to participate in several outreach activities hosted by other organizations that involved parents, private schools, districts, and stakeholders affected by the state scholarship programs. The Department uses each outreach opportunity to disseminate information about the program, what it offers, and participation requirements. Outreach activities give Department staff a presence in the scholarship community and improve accountability through the increased availability of information. When parents are informed about scholarship program requirements, they are better able to hold private schools accountable. Furthermore, the more exposure private schools have to the scholarship program requirements, the more familiar they will become with program procedures and statutory deadlines. A brief summary of events is listed below.

FAANS Meeting

The Florida Association of Academic Nonpublic Schools (FAANS) is an association of private school accrediting organizations. FAANS hosted a meeting in Tallahassee in January 2012. Staff from the Office of Independent Education and Parental Choice gave a presentation on issues related to scholarship programs and private schools in Florida.

Florida Association of Management Information Systems (FAMIS)

FAMIS hosted a meeting on June 15, 2011 to provide information to district MIS contacts responsible for reporting students to the Department of Education MIS system. Districts play an important role in scholarship program accountability because they notify the Department when scholarship students return to public school. Staff from the Office of Independent Education and Parental Choice and the Office of Information Accountability presented information about reporting Florida Tax Credit and McKay Scholarship students for funding.

Florida Catholic Conference

The Florida Catholic Conference hosted an annual meeting from October 7-9, 2012 in Orlando, Florida. Staff from the Office of Independent Education and Parental Choice gave a presentation on current issues related to participating private schools.

FLDOE Administrators Management Meeting

The 2012 Administrator's Management Meeting was held on September 14, 2011. Staff from the Office of Independent Education and Parental Choice presented on topics related to McKay Scholarship and Florida Tax Credit Scholarship programs and Exceptional Student Education (ESE). District ESE administrators and district student services directors were in attendance.

McKay Coalition Conference

The Coalition of McKay Scholarship Schools hosted an annual meeting this year in Orlando, Florida, on October 5, 2012. Staff from the Office of Independent Education and Parental Choice gave a presentation focused on current issues related to compliance requirements for participating private schools as well as legislative changes.

Family Cafe

The annual Family Cafe Conference, an event for children and adults with disabilities and their relatives, was held in Orlando, Florida during June 2012. School Choice staff gave a presentation about the McKay Scholarship Program and provided information to attendees regarding the various school choice options.

Inaugural International School Choice and Reform Academic Conference

The Inaugural International School Choice and Reform Academic Conference was held in January 2012. Staff from the Office of Independent Education and Parental Choice was invited to attend. Having numerous education system reform scholars together each year can better focus and accelerate their research agendas, bring scholarly neutrality to the discussion, and speed the uptake of their most significant findings.

2.0 Digital Learning Group

The 2.0 Digital Learning Group met in April 2012. Staff from the Office of Independent Education and Parental Choice was invited to attend. The goal of this group is to develop a comprehensive plan to accomplish three goals by the 2014-2015 school year: building the infrastructure, provide quality instruction and accelerate institutional reform.

Part III: Legislative Changes

HB 859-Effective March 23, 2012

Revised student eligibility requirements for participation in the FTC program

House Bill 859 revised student eligibility requirements for the FTC program, eliminating the requirement that a student be enrolled in and counted as a full time student in a Florida public school for the previous year in order to receive a scholarship for all students K-5.

This bill also revised s. 1002.20(6)(b)2., F.S., to align with existing provisions for allowing that a student who is currently placed, or during the previous state fiscal year was placed, in foster care as defined in s. 39.01, F.S., may seek a scholarship from an eligible nonprofit scholarship-funding organization in accordance with s. 1002.395, F.S.

Allows participating private schools to offer & administer Florida's statewide assessments

House Bill 859 amended Section 1002.395, F.S., to allow participating private schools to offer and administer Florida's statewide assessments to all students who attend the private school in grades 3 through 10. A participating private school must submit a request in writing to the Department of Education by March 1 of each year to offer the statewide assessments in the subsequent school year.

Increased tax credit cap amount applicable to program

House Bill 859 increased the tax credit cap that Scholarship Funding Organizations can raise to \$229 million for the 2012-2013 school year and conforms school year references.

Revised DOE duties relating to site visits

House Bill 859 revised the Department's selection of private schools participating in the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program for site visits eliminating the requirement that they be "random" and providing for other site visits at any time to **any school** that has received a notice of noncompliance or notice of proposed action within the previous two years.

Revised the Commissioner of Education authority

House Bill 859 revised factors for which the Commissioner of Education may deny, suspend, or revoke a private school's participation in the FTC scholarship program to include: failure to reimburse an eligible nonprofit scholarship-funding organization; prior criminal sanction; administrative fine, license revocation; or suspension, program eligibility suspension, termination or revocation related to an owner's or operator's management of an educational institution.

Factors were also added in for which the Commissioner of Education may immediately suspend payment of scholarship funds, to include a previous pattern of failure to comply with the requirements to participate in the FTC scholarship program pursuant to s. 1002.395, F.S., or s. 1002.421, F.S.

Established a norm referenced testing submission deadline

House Bill 859 established a requirement that schools participating in the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship be required to report norm referenced testing or state assessment scoring information annually, by August 15.



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