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# Public Education Gains From Private-School-Voucher Program

By **ALEX TIEGEN**  
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Florida public schools, faced with fierce competition for students from private schools, raised their scores on standardized tests slightly after the creation of the state's business-supported private-school-voucher program, according to a National Bureau of Economic Research report recently released.

The report shows that the Florida tax credit scholarship program, which launched in the fall of 2002, had a more positive effect on public education in some areas of the state, the report's main author said Thursday. The program, which gives tax credits to businesses that fund private-school scholarships for children from low-income families, was just expanded this past legislative session.

"I'm neither an advocate nor an opponent of vouchers," said David Figlio, Orlington Lunt professor of education and social policy at Northwestern University. "... These results and the other work that I've been doing are increasing my confidence in the effectiveness of the program."

The report, published by the well-known economic research organization this week, concentrates on the 2001-2002 school year, the first year applications could be accepted for the tax credit scholarship program and the most ideal for showing the effect of competition.

The study -- which on the whole ranged from the fall of 1999 school year to the spring of 2007 school year -- concluded that public schools in areas where there was high competition from private schools posted higher standardized test scores than schools in other areas of the state.

The gains were made mainly among high school and middle school students, whose families face higher expenses than those of younger children.

The results, which took into account the distance and type of private schools near public schools, showed Figlio and research partner Cassandra Hart that gains were about half as much as those made in a major class-size-reduction experiment in Tennessee.

The report showed that vouchers are no "silver bullet" in defeating inadequacies in Florida's education system. But it was a good start.

On April 22 Gov. Charlie Crist signed into law a measure that increased funds for the program -- which enrolled more than 27,700 students in private schools this year -- from \$118 million to \$140 million. Businesses participating in the program originally received credits for corporate income and insurance premium taxes, but the new law broadened the program to include several additional tax credits.

The scholarship expansion was opposed by the Florida Education Association, the state's largest teachers union, when it came before the Legislature. The association said it would take money away from public schools.

The FEA also opposed the opportunity scholarship program, which issued private school vouchers to low-income parents whose children attended failing schools. The union successfully fought for intervention by the Florida Supreme Court, and the court ruled the private school provision unconstitutional in 2006.

Mark Pudlow, spokesman for the FEA, said he had not seen the new report, but that studies that made similar assertions of public school gains as a result of vouchers were often created by politically motivated think tanks.

"I have not seen any independent research that says school vouchers raise test scores in public schools," he said.

*Reach Alex Tiegen at [Alex.Tiegen@gmail.com](mailto:Alex.Tiegen@gmail.com) or (561) 329-5389.*