

School Reform News

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Florida School Choice Program Grows 25 Percent



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Funds for Florida's K-12 tax-credit scholarships will expand another 25 percent next year, thanks to the popularity of private school choice among poor families.

About 61,000 low-income students will receive scholarships to attend private schools this fall through the program, said Jon East, a vice president at Step Up for Students, the nonprofit that administers it. About 2.7 million students attend Florida public schools, and about half potentially qualify for the scholarships.

About 94,000 students applied before the June cutoff, and East said he expects another long waiting list this year: "We see on the horizon the day when all students who want to have those sorts of options will have it, and the waiting list will be eliminated."

Funded by Private Donations

Donations from businesses, which receive dollar-for-dollar tax credits, fund the program. For 2013-14, the tax credit cap is \$286 million. If donations rise to at least 90 percent of the cap, it automatically increases by 25 percent the following year.

Students whose families make up to 185 percent of the federal poverty level, or \$43,500 for a family of four, are eligible.

"Students who come from economically

disadvantaged backgrounds have greater challenges. They always have, so it's tougher for them to be successful in school," East said. "There tend to be fewer alternatives or options for these kids."

Any participating school that receives more than \$250,000 in scholarship money must have a certified public accountant file a financial report each year, and students in third through 10th grade must take a nationally recognized test.

"The state pays attention to what the private schools are doing," said David Figlio, director of the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University, who has studied the Step Up program for several years.

Opening Opportunities

At Bhaktivedanta Academy in Alachua, Florida, about 30 percent of the students attend on a Step Up scholarship.

"We have many families that, under normal circumstances, an education with us wouldn't be possible without the program," said David Aguilera, head of the school.

Many parents send their children to Bhaktivedanta because it offers a more wholistic approach to education, including religious and social formation, Aguilera said. The area has a strong Hindu population, but Bhaktivedanta is the only Hindu school nearby, Aguilera said.

Annual tuition ranges from \$4,375 for half-day pre-kindergarten to \$6,150 for middle school, according to the school's website. Step Up for Students can cover up to \$4,335 in private tuition or \$500 in transportation costs for students to attend a public school in another district.

Research Says

While emotions run high during debates about school choice, neither extreme fears nor extreme enthusiasm fit

the program's actual outcomes, Figlio said.

The program mostly attracts struggling students in struggling schools, Figlio said, rather than emptying public schools of "the best and the brightest" as some charge.

The average household income for scholarship students was 6 percent above the poverty level, East said. More than half (54 percent) of students live in single-parent households and more than two-thirds are black or Hispanic.

"The makeup of this program speaks to educational need and speaks to people who have certain challenges related to economic challenges within their household," East said.

As a result of the scholarships, public school test scores are improving modestly, but the program is not revolutionizing education, Figlio said.

"At the end of the day, what do we see with this program?" Figlio said. "It seems like it's been moderately beneficial, and I don't really see any losers."

School Choice in Florida

Compared to the 51,000 students served through Step Up last year, 200,000 Florida students enrolled in charter schools and 27,000 received vouchers for students with learning disabilities, East said.

"There was a great deal of hostility when the program was passed in 2001, but they've now had 12 years to see that this isn't a competitor to the public school system, it's a partner," East said.

More public school employees are beginning to say, "Wait a minute. It's all hands on deck for low-income students, and we need everyone to roll up their sleeves and help," he said.

Image by Gus Estrella.