State programs help pay cost at private schools

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Few education initiatives in Florida are expanding faster than the Legislature’s efforts to cover education costs for families who want to send their children to private schools.

Florida’s Tax Credit Scholarship Program for low-income families continues to grow rapidly, aided by 2014 legislation that allowed more families to enroll.

And the state’s Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts program is entering its second year, with individual scholarships that allow families to tailor education services for special needs children and young adults. The money can pay for everything from school tuition to therapists to college savings accounts.

Because the cost of living varies across Florida, the PLSA scholarship amount varies according to grade and county. In Pinellas County, the scholarships are $10,025 for students in kindergarten through third grade, $10,070 for students in grades 4 through 8 and $10,022 for those in high school.

As for the tax credit scholarship program, known as the FTC, about 70,000 low-income students statewide are receiving nearly $5,700 each this year to cover private school tuition and fees, or to pay transportation costs to a public school in another county. Participation is up 31 percent over last year, and the money is going to nearly 1,000 private schools, most of them faith-based.

Funding for the PLSA program was directly allocated by the Legislature. But the FTC program is paid for indirectly through a separate mechanism. Corporations redirect money they owe for certain state taxes to two nonprofit organizations — Step Up for Students and AAA Scholarship Foundation. The state, in turn, gives those corporations $1 in tax credits for every dollar they give.

Not everyone agrees with the concept. Opponents say it’s wrong to funnel money meant to benefit the general public into private, often religious, schools. Proponents say it’s legitimate because the money used for the program never passes through a public agency.

They also argue the program offers more choices to families who say public schools don’t meet their needs.

Families must apply and provide documentation for both the low-income and special needs programs. To contact Step Up for Students, visit stepupforstudents.org or call toll-free 1-877-735-7897. To contact AAA Scholarship Foundation, visit aascholarships.org or call toll-free 1-888-707-2465.

NOTE: In the accompanying list, the Pinellas schools with one asterisk participate in the FTC. The schools with two asterisks participate in the FTC and the PLSA.

Schools that participate

Clearwater
- Abundant Life Christian Academy
- Blossom Montessori School for the Deaf
- Calvary Christian High School
- Clearwater Academy International Inc.
- Clearwater Central Catholic High School
- Countryside Christian Academy
- Crossroads School Clearwater Campus
- DePauw School for Dyslexia Inc.
- First Lutheran School
- Genesis Christian Academy
- Guardian Angels Catholic School
- Heritage Christian Academy
- Iva Christian School
- Kids First Christian Preschool and Kindergarten
- Lakeside Christian School
- Northbay Christian Academy
- Safety Harbor Montessori Academy
- Saint Cecilia Interparochial
- Saint Paul’s School
- Skycrest Christian School
- Superior Collegiate
- Woodlawn Community Academy

Dunedin
- Cornerstone Christian School
- Dunedin Academy
- Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic School
- Tampa Bay Waldorf Middle School

Gulfport
- Sunflower Private School
- Walden School

Largo
- Carmelot School
- Country Day School
- Grad Academy
- Indian Rocks Christian School
- Iva Christian School
- Saint Patrick School
- The Movement School
- Westside Christian School

Oldsmar
- Oldsmar Christian School

Palm Harbor
- Center Academy
- Huntington Learning Center
- New Horizons Country Day School
- New Middle School
- Palm Harbor Montessori School
- Soar School at East Lake
- Suncoast Waldorf School
- Tampa Bay Waldorf Middle School
- The Academy at Suncoast Private Sanctuary

Pinellas Park
- Acres of Fun Child Care Center
- American Montessori Academy
- Center Academy - Pinellas Park
- Classical Christian School for the Arts Inc.
- Covenant Academy
- Creative Learning Center
- Esther’s School
- Morning Star School of Pinellas Park
- Sacred Heart Catholic School

Safety Harbor
- Northbay Christian Academy
- Espiritu Santo Catholic School
- Safety Harbor Montessori Academy

St. Petersburg
- Aba Academy
- Academy Prep Center of St. Petersburg
- Admiral Farragut Academy
- Alegria Montessori School Inc.
- Bethel Community Christian School
- Canterbury School of Florida
- Community Christian School of Five Oaks
- Elim-Jr. Academy
- Grace Lutheran School
- Gulf Coast Christian School
- Gulfcoast Seventh-day Adventist School
- Holy Family
- Keswick Christian School
- King Queen Christian School for All Students
- Liberty Christian School
- Mount Moriah Christian Fundamental Academy
- Mount Zion Christian Academy
- Northside Christian School
- Our Savior Lutheran School
- St. Jude Cathedral School
- St. Paul Catholic School
- St. Petersburg Catholic High School
- St. Petersburg Christian School
- St. Raphael Catholic School
- Shorecrest Preparatory School
- Southside Christian Academy
- Special Kids St. Petersburg
- St. Raphael Catholic School
- The Broach School
- The School of the Immaculata
- World Changers Christian Academy

St. Pete Beach
- Montessori by the Sea
- St. John Visnay Catholic School

Seminole
- Bay Pinet Lutheran School
- Blessed Sacrament Catholic School
- Esther’s School Seminole
- Lif-T Academy
- Special Kids Seminole

Tarpon Springs
- Academy at the Beach
- Solid Rock Community School