

Partly sunny,  
breezy, scattered  
showers later.

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## More choice, better outcomes the reality for Florida's public education system

RON MATUS

*Special to the Chronicle**Guest COLUMN*

For two decades, opponents of education choice have screamed the sky is falling on Florida's education system, even as clear evidence shows public schools getting better. The Chronicle is the latest to do so, concluding in its Jan. 13 editorial that policy makers have put our schools on a "ruinous path."

It's true Florida has expanded education choice as much as any state in America. But it's also true that over that same span, Florida's academic trend lines have risen as much as any in America, and, by some key measures, Florida schools are now among the best in America.

Ruinous path? Education Week ranked Florida No. 3 in K-12 achievement last year. Florida now ranks No. 3 in the percentage of graduating high school seniors who pass Advanced Placement exams. And once adjusted for demographics, Florida ranks No. 1, No. 1, No. 3 and No. 8 on the reading and math tests that are core to the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

This, even though Florida has some of the highest rates of low-income students in

America, and among the lowest per-pupil spending. New York has fewer low-income students; it spends two and a half times more per student. Yet Florida outperforms New York on those national tests, and Education Week ranks New York a meh No. 20 in achievement.

How can this be? Florida policy makers did indeed come upon a fork in the road — and they took the path less travelled. Instead of piling more regulations on schools, they've pushed towards an accountability system that better balances regulations with parental choice — so parents have more power to drive quality through their choices.

The data shows parents have exercised that power wisely. The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, for example, now serves 100,000 low-income students each year. We know from a decade's worth of test score analyses (scholarship students are required by law to take standardized tests) that those students were typically the lowest-performing students in their prior public schools. But now, according to a 2019 study by the Urban Institute, they're

43% more likely than their public-school peers to enroll in four-year colleges, and 20% more likely to earn bachelor's degrees.

The benefits don't end there. Other rigorous research finds competition from choice spurred higher test scores and fewer suspensions in public schools. And don't forget the scholarship is worth 60% of district per-pupil spending. That's why a stack of other studies all concluded the program saves taxpayer money that can be re-invested in public schools.

It hasn't "compounded the fiscal challenge of the state's public schools," as the Chronicle insists. It's eased that challenge.

Better outcomes. Less cost. A rising tide that lifts all boats.

That's not a "ruinous path" for public education.

That's a better way to help it fulfill its promise.

*Ron Matus is policy and public affairs director for Step Up For Students, the nonprofit that administers five state education choice scholarship programs, and a former state education reporter at the Tampa Bay Times.*