

Teachers, education choice will set you free

In the meantime, teacher entrepreneurs will keep finding solutions on their own.



Florida has been a national pacesetter for a quarter century when it comes to thoughtful public education policy. But here's a remarkable trend that's been mostly off the radar: the accelerating extent to which Florida's expansion of education choice is benefiting not only students and families, but

educators.

Tens of thousands of Florida educators are now teaching in private, charter and virtual schools that didn't exist a generation ago. Even more compelling: The growing number of former public-school teachers who left their classrooms to start innovative private schools and, more recently, their own micro-schools, hybrid home-schools, and home-school co-ops.

One former district Teacher of the Year started a micro-school based on a cross-curricular approach called arts integration. A former statewide ESE Teacher of the Year cofounded a school for students with autism. It can serve about 50 students but two years in, with zero marketing, 200 families applied. Yet another highly decorated former public-school teacher co-founded a 400-student school in Tampa that, four years later, established a second 400-student campus in Jacksonville.

Education choice enabled all of them.

Florida's income-based school choice scholarships are now worth about \$7,700 each — and available to roughly 70% of students. Education savings accounts for students with special needs are worth about \$10,000 each. Empowering families with the ability to customize their children's education creates demand for schools and services that meet their needs. Educators are in turn empowered to meet that demand.

It's now totally doable for teachers to create their own models in line with their ideals for teaching and learning — and to cater to growing masses of Florida families who now have the power to choose them.

This encouraging rise in choice and entrepreneurship coincides with a more sobering trend: The growing number of public-school teachers who are unhappy with their jobs.

A national survey of public-school teachers commissioned by the Winston School of Education and Social Policy at Merrimack College and conducted in early 2022 by the Education Week Research Center [found teacher satisfaction at an all-time low](#). Only 12% of respondents were “very satisfied” with their jobs, down

from 62% in 2008 and well below the previous low of 33% in 1986.

The reasons for this downturn are myriad and complex. But the expansion of choice opens the door to potential solutions.

In this regard, Florida's teachers-turned-entrepreneurs are trailblazers. That's why [Step Up For Students](#) and [EdChoice](#) gathered 10 of them for a focus group. We wanted to know what their motivations were, what hurdles they faced, and what solutions might help clear those hurdles. We compiled their insightful answers in this new report [here](#).

Like parents, educators have endless reasons for wanting learning options. It is noteworthy, though, that nearly all our focus group participants were frustrated by their own children's struggles with the systems they worked for. Several also said they aimed to create models that worked better not just for students, but teachers.

Very real hurdles are keeping more teachers from the path to freedom. It's hard to compete with public-sector retirement benefits. It's not easy finding startup funds. And perhaps no challenge causes bigger headaches than navigating zoning and building codes to access adequate, affordable facilities.

These hurdles, though, are hardly insurmountable. Policymakers will spur even more innovation if they turn their attention to easing them.

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During the focus group sessions, it was eye-opening to see how often participants would nod their heads in agreement about what turned out to be common challenges. Yet the entrepreneurs didn't know each other existed, so their collective wisdom hadn't been previously shared.

That's starting to change. Every day, awareness is growing, networks are forming, and more teachers are learning from colleagues who've been-there-done-that.

Teachers, if you love teaching but feel stifled by the system, you now have options. The door to controlling your own destiny has never been more open.

Ronda Dry is the senior director of customer experience at Step Up For Students, the nonprofit that helps administer Florida's education choice scholarship programs. She is also a former classroom teacher and principal who co-authored the new report, “How Do I Stay In It But Not Stay In It: Leaving a Classroom But Starting a School.”