

Tampa Bay Times

FLORIDA'S BEST NEWSPAPER

 tampabay.com

★★★ Tuesday, July 4, 2023 | \$2

Column

Fla. is not flying blind on education choice. Here's how we know that.

The Tampa Bay Times' Editorial Board rightly expresses alarm over declining reading and math scores among the nation's 13-year-olds ("Why accountability matters so much to Florida's schools and vouchers"). However, the editorial oddly characterizes new legislation that went into effect Saturday as the beginning of a "massive experiment in school choice."



SCOTT KENT

Florida has been "amid a revolution in education" for four decades. It began with magnet schools in the early 1980s. Charter schools and the Florida Virtual School followed in the 1990s, tax credit scholarships were created in 2001, and all

Florida families were given access to education choice in the just-completed 2023 legislative session.

Today, over half of Florida's K-12 students are participating in education choice options — and we have plenty of hard (not anecdotal) evidence these students are succeeding.

An Urban Institute study found that students enrolled in private schools on the tax credit scholarship were 43% more likely to attend four-year colleges than like students in public schools, and up to 20% more likely to earn bachelor's degrees.

We also know that Catholic school students nationwide defied the decline in National Assessment of Educational Progress scores. Although those scores are not broken down by state, it's worth noting that nearly half of the more than 78,000 K-12 Catholic school students in Florida receive one of the state's education choice scholarships.

For the last 20 years, with each expansion of education choice in Florida, critics have predicted apocalyptic consequences for public education. Yet, as choices have grown, public schools have improved their performance. In the late 1990s, Florida's NAEP scores in reading and math were near the bottom of the nation. While we await the breakdown by state of the just-released NAEP scores, in the previous rankings Florida was No. 1, No. 1, No. 3 and No. 8 on the four core NAEP tests, once adjusted for demographics.

We've seen the same dramatic improvement in other academic indicators. Florida now ranks No. 2 in the nation for perfor-



MATIAS J. OCNER | Miami Herald

Gov. Ron DeSantis signs a bill to expand school vouchers across Florida during a news conference in Miami on March 27. The bill took effect Saturday. Today, over half of Florida's K-12 students are participating in education choice options.

mance on Advanced Placement exams, and No. 3 in the nation in K-12 Achievement, according to Education Week.

Research also has found that as the Tax Credit Scholarship program grew, students in public schools most impacted by the competition saw higher test scores, lower absenteeism and fewer suspensions.

Finally, testing accountability for scholarships already exists. All scholarship students in grades three through 10 must take a nationally norm-referenced test approved by the Florida Department of Education, or the statewide assessment. Schools must submit these test results to the Learning Systems Institute at Florida State University, which publicly reports statewide learning gains for reading and math down to the private school level where privacy laws allow.

In addition, Florida's new law expanding scholarship programs creates Personalized Education Programs (PEP), an education savings account for students who are

not attending public or private schools full time. These students are required annually to submit a Student Learning Plan to their scholarship funding organization, and take a Department of Education-approved national norm-referenced test and submit results to the funding organization.

Scholarships also are subject to a different kind of accountability: consumer choice. A family dissatisfied with their child's school can withdraw the student and use their scholarship funds elsewhere. Schools that don't deliver won't stay in business.

Florida is not taking a leap into the great unknown of education choice, using an untested vehicle to explore dangerous depths. It has decades of experience and proven results to continue guiding it at the forefront of providing families more options for their children's education.

Scott Kent is director of strategic communications for Step Up For Students in St. Petersburg.