



# EDUCATION AND SCHOOL CHOICE IN FLORIDA

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School choice is a highly debated topic nationwide and is particularly salient in Florida, where 13 percent of students are enrolled in a private educational choice program, the highest rate in the nation.<sup>1</sup> As of December 2024, there are 80 school choice programs in 31 states, including Puerto Rico and Washington, D.C., serving over one million students.<sup>2</sup> Conservative organizations like the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute have applauded the state's efforts in school choice. Proponents believe school choice is about a "recognition that children should be educated based on their needs, not their addresses."<sup>3</sup> Thus, parents can be empowered to select a school based on their child's needs and can choose not to attend area schools that may be failing. To them, increased school options encourage competition between schools, which should theoretically improve public, charter, and private schools as they vie for the same students. "If money is following students from public schools into private schools and charter schools, that creates incentives for public schools to retain students, so they'll have to raise their productivity."<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, liberal organizations like the NAACP note the harmful effects of school choice on public school enrollment and funding. In fact, although Florida's population of 5- to 17-year-olds grew by 9% from 2012 to 2022, public school enrollment decreased by 7% during that time period.<sup>5</sup> In terms of school funding, in fiscal year 2023-2024, \$2.1 billion was diverted from Florida's public-school fund toward the voucher program.<sup>6</sup> Given lower enrollment numbers and budget cuts, it is not surprising that public schools in Florida have been closing, particularly in

populous counties such as Duval, Miami-Dade, and Broward. Notably, Broward County Public Schools is considering the closure of over forty schools.<sup>7</sup> The NAACP raises concerns about public schools losing funding, as they predominantly serve students of color.<sup>8</sup> Detractors cite other concerns, including the differing standards of private and charter schools, arguing that they "lack accountability compared to public schools, leading to students not receiving the education parents believe they are getting."<sup>9</sup> Others argue that vouchers and other programs do not have the intended effect, as economically disadvantaged students often do not use them due to a lack of information, access to transportation, and other factors.<sup>10</sup> In fact, in



<sup>1</sup> Ritter, Colyn. "2025 EdChoice Share: Exploring Where America's Students Are Educated - EdChoice." EdChoice, January 27, 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Hroncich, Colleen. "The Status of School Choice: Looking Back at Gains in 2024." Cato.org, December 17, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Iglinski, Peter. "Do the Benefits of School Choice Miss the Grade?" University of Rochester News Center, July 17, 2025.

<sup>5</sup> Allen, Catherine. "Public School Enrollment Is Falling Nationwide. See the Numbers by State." NBCNews.com, April 21, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> "The Harmful Effects of School Choice Initiatives on Public Education and the Disproportionately Harmful Effects on Students of Color." NAACP, November 3, 2025.

<sup>7</sup> Cochran, Lexi Lonas. "Florida Schools Are Closing, but Not Everyone Blames School Choice." The Hill, May 31, 2024.

<sup>8</sup> "The Harmful Effects of School Choice Initiatives on Public Education and the Disproportionately Harmful Effects on Students of Color."

<sup>9</sup> Som, Zoe. "School Choice in the 2024 Election: Pros, Cons, and What Voters Want - The Hunt Institute." The Hunt Institute, April 21, 2025.

<sup>10</sup> Iglinski, Peter. "Do the Benefits of School Choice Miss the Grade?"

2025, 41,000 Florida students who were awarded school choice scholarships did not use them.<sup>11</sup>

The focus of this policy brief is to understand what school choice entails and to measure its effectiveness in terms of both educational and societal outcomes. In other words, does school choice enhance access to quality education and result in better long-term outcomes for students?

## Types of Schools

Before discussing the implications of school choice, it is important to understand the differences among the types of schools. Public schools are tuition-free, funded by tax dollars, generally accept all students, and are subject to the standards of their school district and the State. These are the largest by enrollment: 39 percent of public schools nationwide in 2021 had 500 or more students, compared to 32 percent of charter and 8 percent of private schools. Public schools are the most common school option nationwide.<sup>12</sup>

Private schools are considered selective, often affiliated with religion, and charge tuition. They are not licensed or accredited by the Florida Department of Education; however, they are required to complete an annual online survey to be included in the state's Directory of Private Schools. In many cases, independent governing bodies establish standards, including councils and local dioceses. Private schools (about one-third of which were Catholic) have greater autonomy in admissions and in establishing curriculum standards. Although these schools may receive vouchers, they rely primarily on tuition fees paid by families, diocesan subsidies, and private fundraising.<sup>13</sup> As of 2022, the tuition for

private elementary schools nationwide ranged from \$9,800 to \$28,000 a year.<sup>14</sup>

Generally, religious schools offer lower tuition rates; the average nationwide tuition for Catholic elementary schools is \$3,700 per year, while high school tuition costs around \$8,200 annually (this varies significantly by area).<sup>15</sup> In 2024-2025, there were 1.68 million students enrolled in 5,852 Catholic schools nationwide, with an average student/teacher ratio of 10.9:1. The students of these schools are predominantly White (60.6%), followed by Hispanic (14.5%), and Black (7.6%). Demand for Catholic schools is high, given the increasing number of states with school choice options. In fact, 31 percent of Catholic schools nationwide used parental choice programs, serving 18 percent of students enrolled in those schools.<sup>16</sup>

Typically, parents who send their children to private schools tend to be more involved in their education, as these schools typically require parents to commit to certain behaviors, including a minimum number of volunteer hours. According to the Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey (PFI) administered in 2023 nationwide among students enrolled in K-12 schools, parents of religious private school children attended a mean of eleven school events or meetings compared to 8 for nonreligious private schools and six for public.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Matus, Ron. "Going with Plan B: Why Thousands of Parents Didn't Use Their School Choice Scholarships - NextSteps: Step up for Students." NextSteps, July 15, 2025.

<sup>12</sup> Schaeffer, Katherine. "U.S. Public, Private and Charter Schools in 5 Charts." Pew Research Center, June 6, 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Pascual, Psyche. "Public vs. Private vs. Charter Schools." Great Schools, September 30, 2025.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> "U.S. Catholic School Data." National Catholic Educational Association. Accessed October 21, 2025.

<sup>17</sup> "National Household Education Surveys Program Parent and Family Involvement in Education: 2023." National Center for Education Statistics. Accessed October 21, 2025.

Charter schools are often created when groups of parents, teachers, municipalities, and others apply to the school district for a five-year approval to operate. They are public schools where families do not pay tuition and are open to anyone. However, parents generally must apply to enroll their child in these space-limited schools. Additionally, charter schools are legally able to target specific student groups, including those at risk of failing, students within a certain distance of the school, or those who meet certain eligibility standards.<sup>18</sup> Like public schools, they are accountable to a government body and can be shut down if test scores are exceedingly low. Unlike public schools, they are not run by school boards but rather independently, and in Florida, they must be operated by a nonprofit. They often have a charter with the local government and greater flexibility in curriculum standards.<sup>19</sup> Charter schools are thus free, publicly accountable, and autonomous, as “they have more flexibility in the operations and management of the school than traditional public schools.”<sup>20</sup> In Florida, the most recent enrollment data for the three types of schools is from 2022-2023. In that year, 445,067 PK-12 students were enrolled in private schools (13.4%), while 2,488,140 students (75%) were enrolled in a non-charter public school, and 382,367 (11.5%) in charter schools.<sup>21</sup>

Charter school enrollment has increased across the state from 2020-2021 to 2022-2023 by 11.9 percent, from 341,594 students enrolled in 2020-2021 to 382,367 in 2022-2023. One of the advantages of charter schools is that they provide families from diverse backgrounds with a free alternative to their local school. Charter school enrollment has increased from academic year

**Table 1: School Types at a Glance**

| Metric                              | Public Schools                              | Private Schools                        | Charter Schools                             |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| <b>Cost structure</b>               | Free                                        | Tuition-based                          | Free                                        |
| <b>Admissions Policies</b>          | Open to all                                 | Selective                              | Open but space-limited                      |
| <b>Governing body/bodies</b>        | Local school board/State board of education | Private organization/diocese           | Operated by nonprofit or other organization |
| <b>Size Nationwide</b>              | 39% had 500+ students (fall 2021)           | 32% had 500+ students (fall 2021)      | 8% had 500+ students (fall 2021)            |
| <b>Curriculum Flexibility</b>       | Rigid (must follow state standards)         | Not required to follow state standards | Not required to follow state standards      |
| <b>Florida Enrollment 2022-2023</b> | 2,488,140 (75.0%)                           | 455,067 (13.4%)                        | 382,367 (11.5%)                             |

2020-2021 through 2022-2023 for White (8.5%), Black (8.4%), and Hispanic (15.2%) students.<sup>22</sup>

Other types of schools in Florida include virtual education, with the Florida Virtual School being the largest virtual school in the U.S. In 2024-2025, there were 346,173 part-time (FLEX) enrollments in Florida Virtual School and 9,592 unique students in Florida Virtual School Full Time (FLVS FT).<sup>23</sup> Florida also allows students to learn at home through home education programs, which were established in 1985. Per Florida Statutes, parents and educators responsible for teaching in homeschools do not need a specific educational background or curriculum but must keep records and materials of the student’s work. Additionally, home-schooled students must take one of five academic evaluations each year and submit the results to their school district. In 2023-2024, 155,532 students were enrolled in Florida home

<sup>18</sup> “Frequently Asked Questions.” Florida Department of Education Home. Accessed October 20, 2025.

<sup>19</sup> Schaeffer, Katherine. “U.S. Public, Private and Charter Schools in 5 Charts.” Pew Research Center, June 6, 2024.

<sup>20</sup> “What Is a Charter School?” What is a Charter School | NCSRC. Accessed October 21, 2025.

<sup>21</sup> “Know Your Schools Advanced Reports: PK-12 Enrollment Map.” Florida Department of Education. Accessed October 22, 2025.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> “Florida Department of Education Fact Sheet: Florida’s Public Virtual Education Programs.” Florida Department of Education, October 2024.

school programs, up from 106,115 in 2019-2020.<sup>24</sup>

## School Choice in Florida

Florida is a leader in school choice, which is promoted as the notion that parents should decide on the best learning environment and type of school for their children, whether it be a private, public, charter, or even homeschool.<sup>25</sup> This often entails “programs and policies that let families use public money to access schools beyond their local option, including private schools.”<sup>26</sup> There are multiple school choice programs, including vouchers of state tax dollars for private schools, tax credit scholarships (funded from donations from individuals or businesses that receive state tax credits for their donations), and education savings accounts (ESAs) that are funded with tax dollars and can be used for educational expenses beyond tuition.<sup>27</sup>

Florida is at the center of this controversy due to Governor DeSantis’s push for school choice in recent years. In fact, for the fourth consecutive year, the Heritage Foundation ranked Florida as number one for Education Freedom in its annual Education Freedom Report Card. The report card ranked Florida first overall and in academic transparency. The state ranked second in teacher freedom and education choice.<sup>28</sup> Per Governor DeSantis, “Florida offers a robust array of education choices, which has solidified our state as a national leader in education freedom, parental power, and overall K-12 education.”<sup>29</sup>

In terms of private education, more Florida families can now afford to send their children to

private schools through the Step Up For Students Scholarship, a Family Empowerment Scholarship which covers an average of \$8,200 per student in K-12 in the 2024-25 school year to attend a participating private school of their choice. Students whose household income does not exceed 185% of the federal poverty guidelines are prioritized for this scholarship. Still, as of the 2023-24 school year, under House Bill 1 (HB1), financial eligibility restrictions and enrollment caps have been eliminated in Florida.<sup>30</sup> The Family Empowerment Scholarship for Students with Unique Abilities allows families of students ages 3 and older with a disability to either enroll their child in another public school or receive an education savings account (ESA), which they can use toward private school tuition and fees, online learning programs, tutoring, higher education expenses, and other costs.<sup>31</sup>

Additionally, Florida has expanded the charter school model, particularly “those deemed as ‘Schools of Hope’” or charter schools established in close proximity to underperforming public schools, with a focus on providing lower-income communities with alternatives to the low-performing school.<sup>32</sup> The state also passed legislation allowing charter schools to “co-locate” within public schools.<sup>33</sup> Other steps to foment school choice include establishing education savings accounts (ESAs) in the state. ESAs are available to any student regardless of income, and 285,000 students utilized these to attend private school, with nearly 100,000 using ESAs for special needs students. In 2025, over half of Florida’s 3.5 million K-12 students attended a school of choice,

<sup>24</sup> “Florida Department of Education Fact Sheet: Home Education Program.” Florida Department of Education, August 2024.

<sup>25</sup> The Heritage Foundation. “Education Freedom Report Card: Florida: The Heritage Foundation.” Education Freedom Report Card | The Heritage Foundation. Accessed October 17, 2025.

<sup>26</sup> Durrani, Anayat. “What School Choice Is and How It Works.” U.S. News and World Report, April 14, 2023.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> The Heritage Foundation. “Education Freedom Report Card: Florida: The Heritage Foundation.”

<sup>29</sup> “Florida Ranks #1 in Education Freedom for the Fourth Consecutive Year.” Florida Ranks #1 in Education Freedom for the Fourth Consecutive Year | Executive Office of the Governor, September 9, 2025.

<sup>30</sup> “Family Empowerment Scholarship—Educational Options” Florida Department of Education.

<sup>31</sup> “Family empowerment scholarship—unique abilities (FES UA) faqs.” Accessed November 6, 2025.

<sup>32</sup> Fineout, Gary. “Florida May Shift Students Away from Failing Schools.” AP News, September 13, 2024.

<sup>33</sup> Payne, Kate. “Florida Board of Education Signs off on Major Charter School Expansion.” Sun Sentinel, September 24, 2025.

or a choice “outside their zoned neighborhood assignment.”<sup>34</sup>

## School Performance

Given the state’s focus on promoting school choice, how are charter and private schools performing relative to public schools? Are these schools performing better, and if so, what accounts for these differences? The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is a congressionally mandated program by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) that has been measuring student progress since 1969. It administers nationwide assessments in mathematics, reading, writing, and other subjects to students in grades 4, 8, and 12 in public, private, and charter schools. The results from public and charter schools are available at the national, state, and district levels. Results from private Catholic schools are available only at the national level, for grades 4 and 8 in mathematics and reading. In 2024, the mathematics and reading results for fourth- and eighth-grade students are not available for private schools overall; they are provided only for Catholic private schools and no other types of private schools. For this reason, we will cite national data for those two grade levels.<sup>35</sup>

In 2024, fourth graders in private Catholic schools outperformed both public and charter schools by 11 points in math (*Table 2*). The difference is even greater in eighth grade, with average scores of 293, 272, and 272 out of 500 for Catholic, charter, and public schools. Catholic schools also outperform both public and charter schools on average reading scores in grades 4 and 8. These higher average scores are held across racial and ethnic groups. For instance, nationwide in 2024, eighth-grade Black students in Catholic schools had an average math score of 267, compared to 259 in charter schools and 251 in public schools, and

eighth-grade White students had average math scores of 299, 290, and 284 for Catholic, charter, and public schools, respectively. Eighth-grade Hispanic students had average math scores of 278, 263, and 257 for Catholic, charter, and public schools.<sup>36</sup>

**Table 2: Grade, Subject, and School Type**

| <b>4<sup>th</sup> Grade</b> |                           |                        |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|
|                             | Reading<br>Max score= 500 | Math<br>Max score= 500 |
| <b>Public</b>               | 214                       | 237                    |
| <b>Charter</b>              | 214                       | 236                    |
| <b>Private: Catholic</b>    | 230                       | 247                    |
| <b>8<sup>th</sup> Grade</b> |                           |                        |
|                             | Reading<br>Max score= 500 | Math<br>Max score= 500 |
| <b>Public</b>               | 257                       | 272                    |
| <b>Charter</b>              | 257                       | 272                    |
| <b>Private: Catholic</b>    | 277                       | 293                    |

## Reasons for Performance Disparities

Why are students in private schools, particularly Catholic schools, outperforming public and charter students? These higher scores can be attributed to private schools having greater admissions autonomy, with families often interviewed prior to admission for children as young as three. In other words, private schools may exhibit selection bias and admit families from higher income and/or educational levels. If students are more likely to come from higher-income families, given the positive correlation between family income and test scores, the schools may be setting themselves up for greater academic achievement. A model that studies differences in NAEP scores shows that when certain student characteristics are considered, the score difference between schools types is no longer statistically significant. Furthermore, “most of the total variance was due to heterogeneity

<sup>34</sup> “The School Choice Boom in Florida.” The Wallstreet Journal Opinion, June 12, 2025.

<sup>35</sup> “NAEP Report Cards - about the Nation’s Report Card.” The Nation’s Report Card. Accessed October 17, 2025.

<sup>36</sup> “NAEP Dashboards - Schools.” The Nation’s Report Card. Accessed October 17, 2025.

among students within schools rather than heterogeneity among school mean scores.”<sup>37</sup>

Research into standardized tests and demographic data shows that income is correlated with higher scores. Data from the College Board on SAT test-takers shows that students from higher-income families tend to have higher SAT scores. Relatedly, a 2021 study by the American Institutes for Research found that Indiana private school students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who used the voucher program had lower scores than private school students without vouchers, highlighting the role of income in test scores. However, private school students with and without vouchers were “less likely than traditional public school students to ever fail a course, or to ever be suspended in high school, and they were more likely to enroll in college.”<sup>38</sup> Relatedly, private schools have the flexibility to expel students who do not meet their academic and/or behavioral standards.

Other reasons for this performance gap include smaller class sizes in private schools, which can help foment a more individualized learning experience for students, greater parental involvement, and curriculum flexibility. Public schools receive letter grades based on their students’ performance on standardized tests, which, in turn, affects the funding they receive.<sup>39</sup> Private schools are not measured by these tests, and teachers can thus “take a more holistic and nuanced approach to measuring student performance and outcomes, emphasizing critical thinking and individual growth over time.”<sup>40</sup> Smaller class sizes combined with “more options for courses, more advanced courses, more elaborate art, music, and specialized programs,

more educational trips, better materials in the classroom, and more extracurricular support and options” can help ensure students have a more holistic view of learning and seem better rounded to university admissions counselors.<sup>41</sup> In sum, the higher performance of private school students may be due to selection bias, as schools can determine who they admit and expel students that do not meet more rigorous academic standards, but it may also be attributed to characteristics of these types of schools, including smaller class sizes and curriculum flexibility.

## Student, Societal and Policy Implications

The promotion of school choice has resulted in larger numbers of Florida students in private schools. But what is the return on investment for parents sending their children to private schools? A 2021 article found that students from private schools were more likely to attend top-tier universities. In fact, almost 40 percent of Harvard’s Class of 2018 hailed from private schools.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, “private school students often gain direct access to influential mentors and career connections, particularly in fields like finance, law, and tech.”<sup>43</sup> However, the same can be said of top performing public schools with IB magnet, dual enrollment and other programs. In fact, the best public schools, “are equal to private schools when it comes to preparing students for college.”<sup>44</sup> Students who attend a top-quality university can increase lifetime earnings and those from private schools and the best performing public schools have a higher likelihood of admissions at these schools.

<sup>37</sup> Braun, Henry, Frank Jenkins, and Wendy Grigg. “[Comparing Private Schools and Public Schools Using Hierarchical Linear Modeling](#).” NAEP Studies - 2006461: Comparing Private Schools and Public Schools Using Hierarchical Linear Modeling, July 2006.

<sup>38</sup> Claybourn, Cole. “[Private School vs. Public School](#).” U.S. News and World Report, August 19, 2025.

<sup>39</sup> “[Florida School Recognition Program](#).” Florida Department of Education. Accessed October 22, 2025.

<sup>40</sup> Claybourn, Cole. “Private School vs. Public School.”

<sup>41</sup> “[Does Your High School Impact Your College Admission Chances?](#)” Ivy Scholars, November 15, 2024.

<sup>42</sup> Murphy, James S. “[Private Schools Are the Real College Admissions Scandal](#).” Slate Magazine, June 14, 2021.

<sup>43</sup> Fose, Max. “[Private vs. Public School Education: Best Long-Term ROI?](#)” The Upper Middle, March 19, 2025.

<sup>44</sup> “[Does Your High School Impact Your College Admission Chances?](#)”

Thus, it seems school choice can increase the outcomes of individual students, but what of its effects on the state's public school system and future generations of Floridians? Florida's expansive school choice policies have reshaped K-12 education—expanding options for families but also straining needed resources in public schools, exacerbating equity issues, and creating fragmented systems. While these initiatives garner praise as innovative, they raise concerns about fairness, resource distribution, and long-term educational and economic opportunity.

This analysis raises several questions that require further research.

- Are all children and parents, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, truly given school choice if the state voucher does not cover the full cost of tuition and associated costs such as aftercare, uniforms, and books?
- Are vouchers and school choice helping primarily students from relatively advantaged backgrounds attend private schools instead of serving disadvantaged students?

Given these vouchers and increasing enrollment figures for charter schools, does school choice level the playing field for the state's minority communities?

- Will school choice have negative consequences in the long run for traditional public schools if large numbers of higher-performing students enroll in charter or private schools? In other words, will schools be segregated by meritocracy and academic performance?
- Will public schools lose their true diversity—students from different racial, ethnic, academic, and income backgrounds — if the highest-performing students, middle-class students, and wealthier minority students enroll in charter and private schools? How will school choice impact children with disabilities?
- Does school choice mean privatizing education?
- Will we be measuring individual students and their enrollment options in terms of their individual return on investment or in terms of the social benefits and costs for society as a whole?

