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## Florida remains leader for students benefiting from school choice



### Your Turn

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Guest columnist

The New Year's confetti had barely settled when many Florida families learned of another major reason to rejoice.

Just days after ringing in 2019, the Florida Supreme Court issued a long-awaited decision in a case involving the constitutionality of two K-12 scholarship programs. Together, these programs — the McKay Program for Students with Disabilities and the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program — are relied upon by more than 130,000 students in Florida.

The court's decision left these wildly popular programs intact, and in doing so, lifted the cloud that had been lingering over Florida families since the pro-

grams were added to the sprawling lawsuit nearly five years ago.

Today, while National School Choice Week is celebrated nationwide, Floridians should be particularly proud of how our state has led the way with ambitious reforms to improve education for all. In particular, we should celebrate the fact that Florida respects and protects the fundamental right of all parents to make basic decisions about how and where they learn.

It's not like this everywhere; in states that lack educational options as robust as Florida's, this is a right that is only fully enjoyed by those who can afford to send their children to private schools. But not here.

Florida has become a national leader in providing low-income students the opportunity to obtain an education outside their assigned district, by allowing corporate taxpayers to reduce their tax liability by making donations to the FTC

Program. Those charitable contributions enable over 100,000 low-income students to attend the schools of their parents' choice — public or private, in-district or out-of-district.

The same is true with respect to the nearly 30,000 students with disabilities who have McKay Scholarships. In many states, parents of a child with disabilities must initiate legal action against their assigned school if they are dissatisfied or wish to take advantage of other options. This process is time-consuming, expensive, and unnecessarily adversarial. In Florida, any child with a qualifying disability can obtain funds to attend the school that their parents — and not the state — deem most suitable to meet their needs. Without this kind of mobility, students would remain trapped in a system that may not be working for them.

Skeptical? Talk to a parent of a McKay or FTC scholarship recipient, and

they will probably tell you that they don't know what they'd do without their scholarship.

The McKay and FTC Programs, and others like them, are critical to making sure that Florida offers an educational system that works for all types of students, from all types of backgrounds. And to think, both of these programs were a mere judicial decision away from extermination.

Educational choice is a right, not a privilege to be enjoyed only by the affluent. As the new year dawns and we mark another National School Choice Week, we celebrate the fact that our legislature and courts agree.

*Ari Bargil is an attorney with the Institute for Justice, a national public-interest law firm that successfully litigated on behalf of parents whose children receive McKay and FTC scholarships in Citizens for Strong Schools, Inc. v. Florida State Board of Education.*