



WHY CATHOLIC SCHOOLS IN FLORIDA ARE GROWING: 5 THINGS TO KNOW

Special Report | August 2023 | Lauren May, Patrick Gibbons, Ron Matus

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Why Catholic Schools in Florida Are Growing: 5 Things to Know

Highlights

Growth. Between 2013 and 2023, Florida was the only state in America in the Top 10 for Catholic school enrollment that did not see declines in enrollment. New York saw a 30.7 percent decline over that span; New Jersey, a 33.3 percent decline. Florida experienced 4.4 percent growth.

Diversity. Florida Catholic school enrollment is increasingly diverse in terms of students of color, students with special needs, and students who are not Catholic. Over the past decade, the percentage of students of color in Florida Catholic schools rose from 45.6 percent to 65.0 percent. Florida Catholic schools are now a tick more racially diverse than Florida public schools (at 64.7 percent).¹

Choice. Florida school choice programs are helping to drive that growth and diversity. The number of students using state-funded school choice scholarships to attend Florida Catholic schools has tripled over the past decade, from 13,911 to 41,048. As a share of total enrollment over that span, choice scholarship students have grown from 1 in 6 to nearly half.

Competition. That growth is happening in the most competitive education market in America. Nearly half of all Florida students – 1.6 million total – now attend something other than their zoned neighborhood schools, up from roughly 10 percent a generation ago. That Catholic schools are growing on this landscape speaks volumes about their quality, credibility, and accessibility.

Innovation. Catholic education is also changing on this landscape. Schools are increasingly adding distinctive, innovative programming to the core features that have made them valuable options for generations. And parents are even creating schools that meet their needs.

Introduction

In 1916, three Sisters of St. Joseph at St. Benedict the Moor School in St. Augustine, Florida, generated headlines across America when they were arrested for what was then a state crime: Being white and teaching Black students.²

At the time, the South was in the midst of a particularly virulent wave of bigotry, and two Florida politicians shamelessly used the arrests to harness racist and anti-Catholic sentiment and propel their campaigns for governor and U.S. Senate, respectively. Both candidates won.³ But in court, the Sisters of St. Joseph won, too. Their humble yet unflinching school continued to teach Black students for another half-century.⁴ And it remains a powerful symbol of the role Catholic schools have long played in providing a high quality education to all.

Given that backdrop of faith, tenacity, and opportunity, it's fitting that Catholic schools in Florida are again drawing national attention.

This time, because they're growing again.

Catholic schools across the country continue to struggle with declining enrollment that goes back to the 1960s, making sad stories like [this one](#) ... and [this one](#) ... and [this one](#) ... still all too common.⁵ Over the past decade, only 10 states have shown growth in Catholic school enrollment. Only two have added more than 1,000 students. Only one has significant numbers of students in Catholic schools. (See Appendix A for the full state-by-state breakdown.)

Florida is the outlier.

Between 2013 and 2023, Florida was the only state in the Top 10 for Catholic school enrollment that did not see declines in enrollment, according to data from the National Catholic Educational Association. New York saw a 30.7 percent drop over that span; New Jersey, a 33.3 percent drop. Florida experienced 4.4 percent growth. (See Figure 1)

Figure 1. Trends in states with 10 highest Catholic school enrollments.

State	2013	2023	Change	%Change
California	212,842	187,101	-25,741	-12.1%
New York	187,337	129,893	-57,444	-30.1%
Ohio	135,433	118,861	-16,572	-12.2%
Illinois	148,879	114,936	-33,943	-22.8%
Pennsylvania	139,002	104,108	-34,894	-25.1%
Florida	82,623	86,267	3,644	4.4%
Louisiana	81,121	70,317	-10,804	-13.3%
Texas	78,340	64,243	-14,097	-18.0%
New Jersey	89,403	59,645	-29,758	-33.3%
Missouri	65,638	55,780	-9,858	-15.0%
Total U.S.	2,001,740	1,693,493	-308,247	-15.4%

We don't discount that Florida's population growth may be contributing here. Between 2010 and 2020, Florida had the second highest rate of both overall population growth and the growth of its child population among the Top 10 states for Catholic school enrollment (at 14.6 percent and 4.9 percent, respectively), according to U.S. Census Bureau data. But Texas, the state that led both categories of population growth (at 15.9 percent and 6.0 percent, respectively), also saw significant declines in Catholic school enrollment. For every state in the Top 10, the drop in Catholic school enrollment far outpaces the drop in number of school-age children.⁶ It seems fair to suggest there are other dynamics at play.

This brief aims to put a bigger spotlight on Florida's encouraging trend lines.

It is primarily based on data from the National Catholic Education Association, the Florida Catholic Conference, and Step Up For Students, the nonprofit that administers Florida's school choice and education choice scholarship programs.

Florida's robust and long-running private school choice programs have been critical to the success of Florida's 243 Catholic schools. (See Appendix B for more information about each of the programs.) In March, the Legislature and Gov. Ron DeSantis took those programs to a new level, making every student eligible for choice scholarships. But even before that historic change, more than 70 percent of Florida families could access the state's income-based scholarships, and hundreds of thousands of others could access scholarships for students with special needs.⁷

Choice, though, isn't the only factor here.



Catholic schools in Florida are operating in one of the most competitive environments for public education in America. Nearly half the students in Florida now attend something other than their zoned neighborhood schools.⁸ In Miami-Dade County, the state's most populous, that figure is more than 70 percent.⁹ That Catholic schools are holding their own in this dynamic ecosystem – and are now growing again – speaks volumes about the quality and credibility the Catholic school brand signifies.

It also speaks, we think, to change within the Catholic school sector.

Catholic schools have long been able to point to the “Catholic school advantage.” In Florida, recent analysis by education researcher David Figlio bears out that low-income Catholic school students using the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship are outperforming their peers in non-Catholic schools, with bigger annual learning gains in reading and math.¹⁰ The outcomes are even more noteworthy given 15 years of test score analyses that consistently show scholarship students as a whole – after many had fallen behind in their prior public schools – are now making a year’s worth of progress in a year’s worth of time.¹¹

In other words, Catholic schools in Florida are leading the charge for a sector of disadvantaged students on the rise.

But in today’s choice-rich environment, solid academics alone aren’t always enough to attract and retain parents. Which is why Florida Catholic schools are becoming more diverse by the day, in terms of both the students they’re serving and the programming they’re offering.

Competition, diversification, and innovation are also important parts of the Florida Catholic school story. The following pages offer more detail on all of those components.

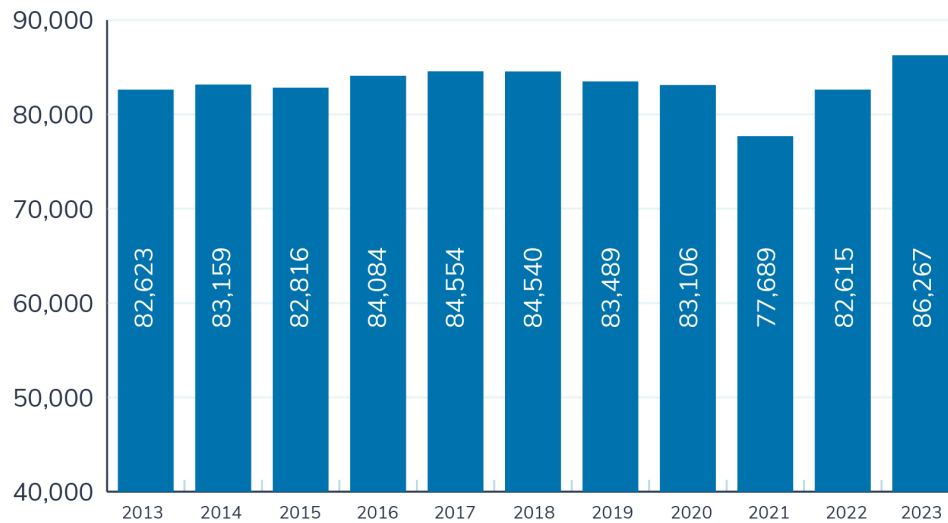


St. Cecelia Interparochial Catholic School in Clearwater is one of a growing number of Florida Catholic schools with IB programs.

5 Things to Know: Growth

For more than a decade, Catholic school enrollment in Florida has held steady. Now it's beginning to pulse up, and anecdotal evidence about demand – more and longer wait lists; schools once half full now at capacity or expanding; new schools opening – suggests this isn't a flash in the pan. Over the past decade, PreK-12 enrollment in Florida Catholic schools rose 4.4 percent. (See Figure 2)

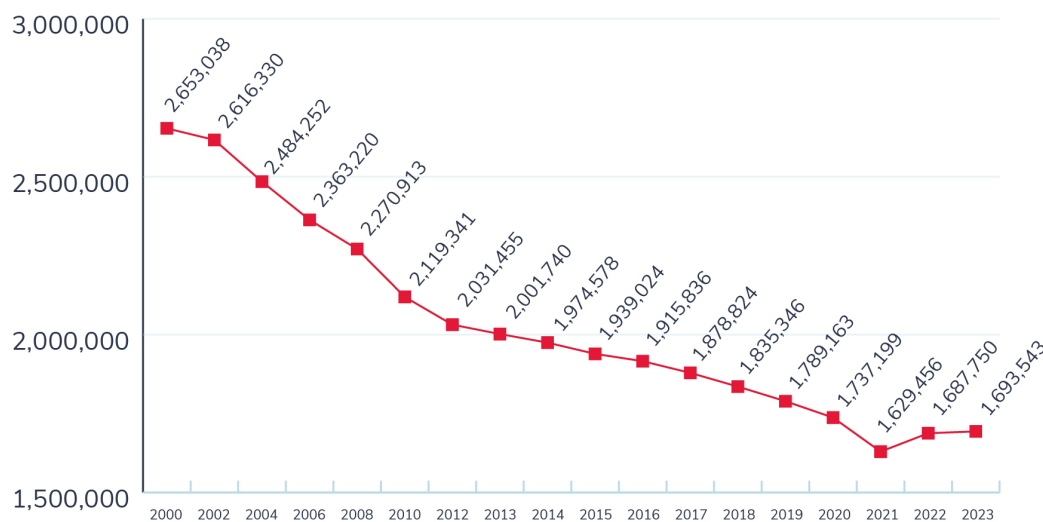
Figure 2. Catholic school PreK-12 enrollment in Florida, 2013-2023.



Source: National Catholic Educational Association

That growth is in sharp contrast to the rest of America. Many states with significant numbers of Catholic students saw enrollment dips in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, then increases in the ensuing two years. But it remains to be seen whether there has been a significant jolt to the longer-term trend. (See Figure 3)

Figure 3. Nationwide Catholic school PreK-12 enrollment, 2000-2023.



Source: National Catholic Educational Association

Spotlight: The Basilica School of St. Mary Star of the Sea, Key West

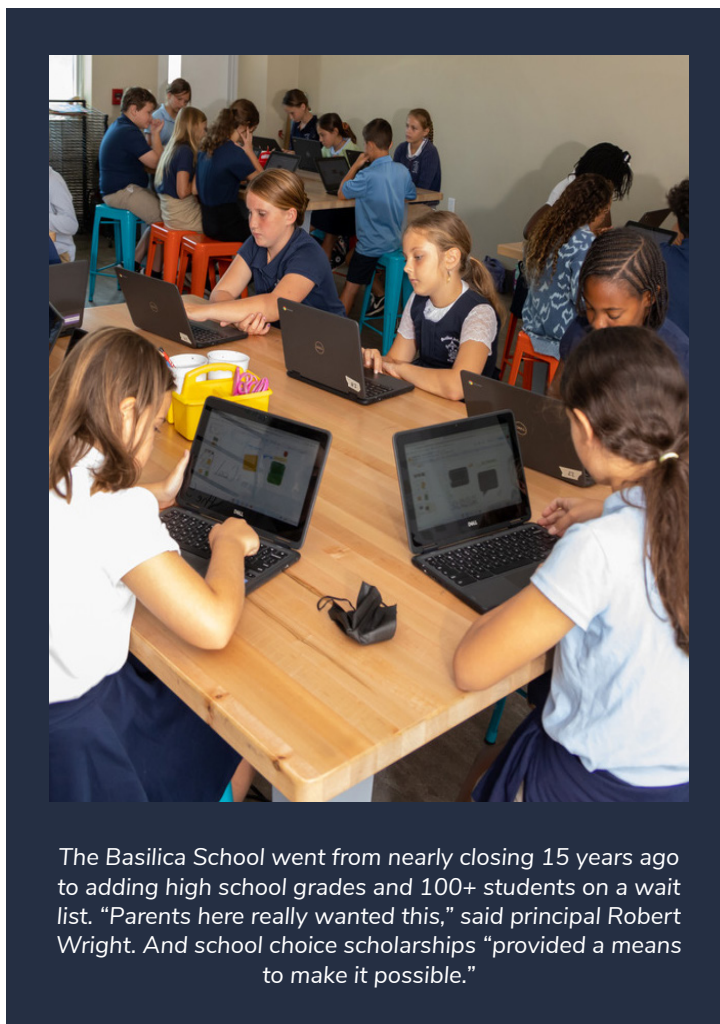
Key West has been without a Catholic high school for 37 years. The last one closed in 1986, after a century of service, due to dwindling enrollment. That left [The Basilica School of St. Mary Star of the Sea](#) as the only Catholic school left in the Florida Keys, and its future wasn't secure either. In 2008, supporters mounted a save-our-schools campaign to keep it from closing.

But as private school choice began to gain real traction in Florida, a funny thing happened: People wanted their Catholic schools back.

Between 2013 and 2019, enrollment at The Basilica School doubled. And when the predominantly working-class parents at the school were asked what they wanted most for their children, they said a Catholic high school. After a feasibility study, the Archdiocese of Miami determined it was doable.

"Parents were teary eyed," said Robert Wright, the principal since 2013. Every year, some families at The Basilica School would leave The Keys so they could access a Catholic high school elsewhere. Now they wouldn't have to. "Their prayers were answered."

The Basilica School is officially [adding high school grades this fall](#), beginning with ninth and tenth grade.¹² (The school did allow a handful of ninth graders to enroll last fall, as part of a successful pilot project.) By year three, it's expecting 180 high school students, virtually all of them using choice scholarships.



The Basilica School went from nearly closing 15 years ago to adding high school grades and 100+ students on a wait list. "Parents here really wanted this," said principal Robert Wright. And school choice scholarships "provided a means to make it possible."

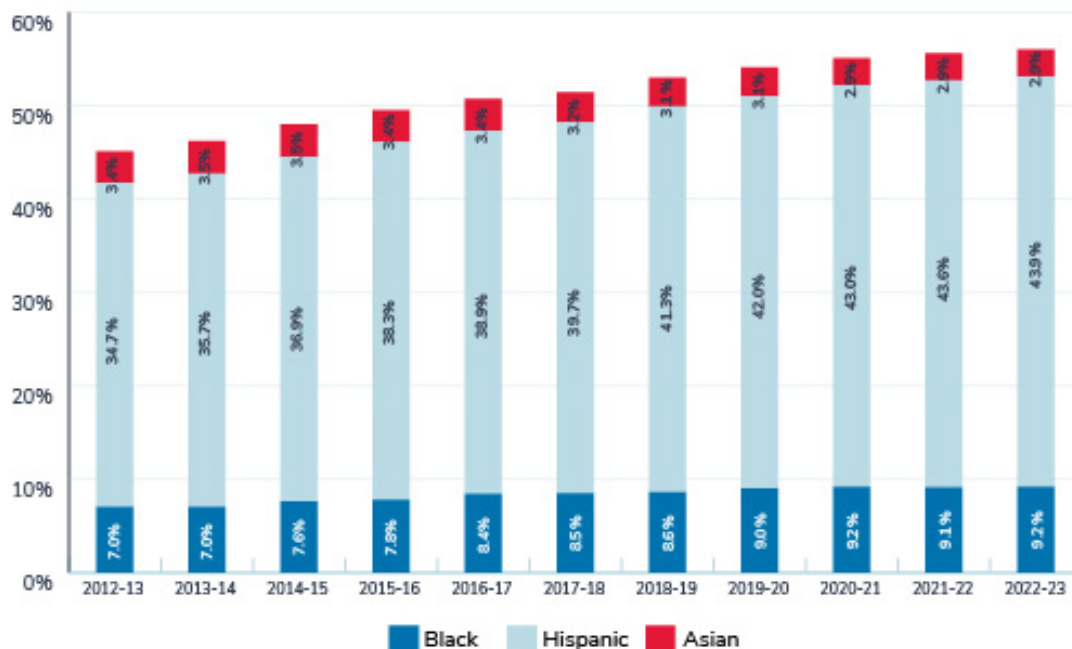
To accommodate them, a new building is set to open in 2024. In the meantime, enrollment is expected to reach 470 this fall, with at least 100 students on a wait list.

The expansion of The Basilica School isn't the only sign of new life for Catholic schools in Florida. St. Malachy Catholic School near Fort Lauderdale [is set to re-open this fall](#), after closing in 2009.¹³ Cristo Rey schools have been added to the Diocese of St. Petersburg and Archdiocese of Miami, and a third is [on its way to the Diocese of Orlando](#).¹⁴ Meanwhile, one Chesterton Academy school, which is rooted in Catholic tradition and part of the Minneapolis-based Chesterton Schools Network, opened in Florida last year – and at least two more are on the way by fall 2024.

5 Things to Know: Diversity

Catholic school enrollment in Florida is increasingly diverse. Over the past decade, the percentage of students of color in Florida Catholic schools grew from 45.6 percent to 65.0 percent. Florida Catholic schools now enroll slightly more students of color than Florida public schools (64.7 percent). (See Figure 4)

Figure 4. Minority student PreK-12 enrollment in Florida Catholic schools, 2013-2023.



Source: Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops

More specifically, the number of Black students and Hispanic students enrolled in Florida Catholic schools is up by roughly a third over the past decade (by 37.6 percent and 32.0 percent, respectively). As a percentage of total enrollment, those groups now make up 9.2 percent and 43.9 percent of the whole, respectively. By contrast, Florida public school enrollment is 20.9 percent Black and 36.4 percent Hispanic.

High-quality learning options for Black and Hispanic students are especially important given long-running achievement gaps that widened in the wake of the pandemic. For example, the latest long-term trend data for 9-year-olds on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, released in the fall of 2022, showed the biggest declines in math and reading scores in decades and especially steep losses for Black and Hispanic students.¹⁵ The latter showed learning losses in math that were roughly twice as big as those for white students, and math scores for Black students rolled back to levels not seen in 28 years.¹⁶

Florida Catholic schools are also seeing significant growth in the number and percentage of students with special needs, and of students who are non-Catholic.

The number of students using special needs scholarships has grown from 2,309 to 6,070 over the past decade, an increase of 162.9 percent. That growth shows how Catholic schools are harnessing the power of the scholarships to manifest their universal Catholic identity and create a more just,

and more inclusive, culture, said Gabriel Cambert, Director of Continuous Improvement at the Archdiocese of Miami. Increasing demands for a variety of settings and supports for students with special needs have propelled Catholic schools to make themselves more accessible, Cambert said. And the increased diversity, in turn, has led to students who are more empathetic and understanding of those around them.

The growth in scholarships has also spurred creation of new schools for students for special needs, including Mother Clelia Morning Star High School in the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee. Mother Clelia began with 10 students in its inaugural year, 2020-21, and has more than doubled its enrollment since.



Scholarship growth has led to the creation of new schools for students with special needs, like Mother Clelia Morning Star High School in the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee.

Meanwhile, the number of non-Catholic students has grown from 10,784 to 16,914 over the past decade, an increase of 56.8 percent. As a share of total enrollment, non-Catholic students have grown from 12.8 percent to 19.2 percent.

The growing diversity of Catholic schools in Florida speaks to a commitment to serve a broad array of families – and to the ability of those families to access schools they value.

Spotlight: St. John Vianney Catholic School, Orlando

Even by Florida standards, where the melting pot is especially rich, the 515 students attending [St. John Vianney Catholic School](#) in Orlando stand out. They have roots in 47 countries, and about 75 percent are Hispanic.



The dual language inclusion program at St. John Vianney Catholic School in Orlando has been going strong since 2016. Last year, 336 of 515 students at the school used state-funded school choice scholarships

In 2016, the Diocese of Orlando started an English and Spanish dual language immersion program at St. John Vianney. Superintendent Henry Fortier brought in Cathy Marshall, a Catholic school principal from Baltimore. She had started a similar program there with help from the [Roche Center for Catholic Education at Boston College](#).

The program at St. John Vianney includes support from both Boston College and the University of Central Florida. It began with PreK students and has expanded one grade every year since. The students work with teachers who are dual-language certified. By the time they're in fifth grade, they will be fully bilingual and biliterate, with benefits that accrue socially and academically.

"These children have linguistic gifts," said Marshall, who left St. John Vianney in July to become the interim principal at Holy Family Catholic School in Orlando. "It's not a deficit."

Hispanic families are primarily drawn to St. John Vianney because of their Catholic faith, Marshall said. But they feel extra welcome because of the school's embrace of the language and culture. Some parents tell her that because of the dual language program, their children are able to speak to their grandparents in their home countries.

"In some places, they lose that," Marshall said. "Here, they get the best of both worlds."

5 Things to Know: Choice

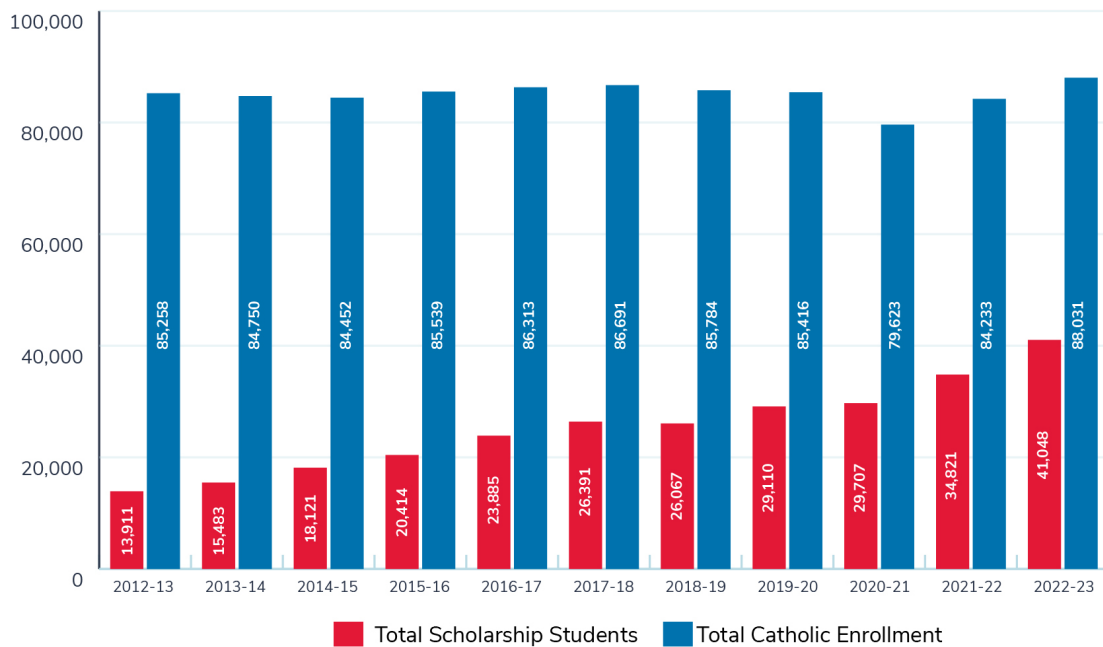
State-funded school choice is one of the keys to Catholic school success in Florida. Florida's steadily expanding school choice programs have allowed steadily growing numbers of parents to access them. (See Appendix B for a breakdown of Florida's array of choice scholarships.)

In March, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis signed HB 1 into law at Christopher Columbus High School, a Catholic school in Miami. The law makes all 3.4 million students in Florida eligible for a state-funded education savings account, which can be used for private school tuition and other educational uses.



Even before HB 1, however, more than 70 percent of families in Florida were eligible for the state's income-based scholarships alone. That eligibility and accessibility is reflected in the growing share of Florida Catholic school students who use school choice scholarships. (See Figure 5)

Figure 5. Share of choice scholarship students in Florida Catholic schools, 2013-2023.



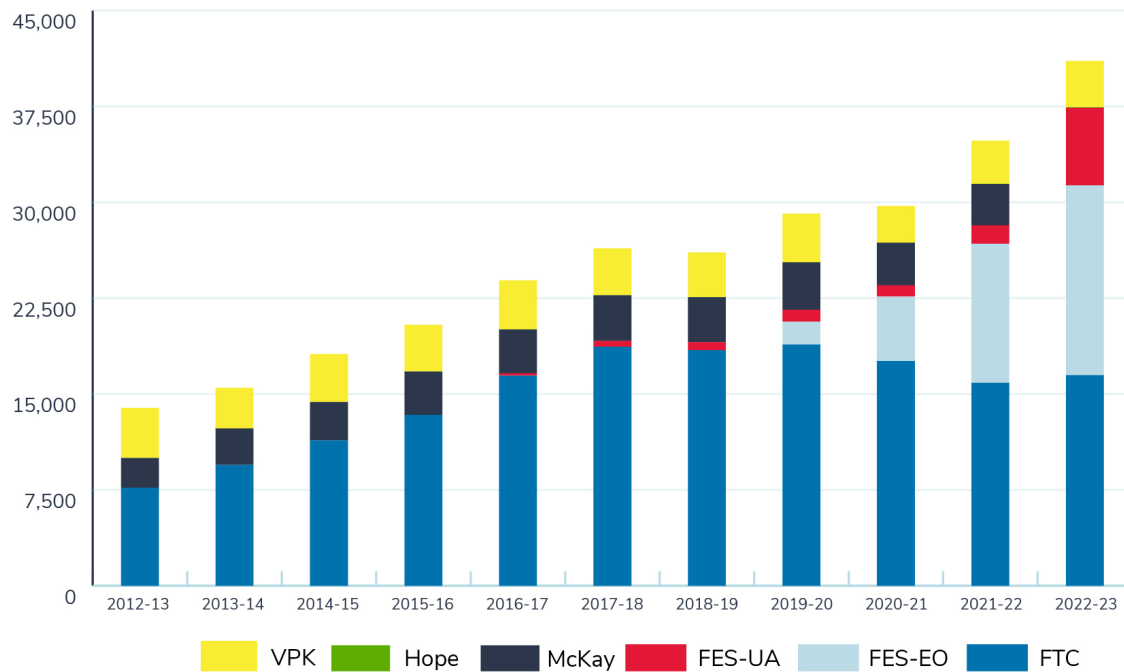
Source: Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops. Note: The total enrollment figures are slightly higher than the figures from the NCEA, because they include a broader group of PreK and preschool students. The scholarship totals here also include Florida's state-funded vouchers for PreK students.

As a share of total enrollment, the percentage of choice scholarship students in Florida Catholic schools has risen from 16.3 percent to 46.6 percent. That percentage is likely to rise significantly this fall, now that every family is eligible for scholarships.

An array of choice scholarships are in use.

The following chart reflects scholarship growth in Florida Catholic schools by scholarship type. Again, see Appendix B for a breakdown of the different state-funded scholarships. (See Figure 6)

Figure 6. Enrollment in Florida Catholic schools by scholarship type, 2013-2023.



Source: Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops. Note: VPK refers to Voluntary Prekindergarten, Florida's state-funded voucher for PreK students.

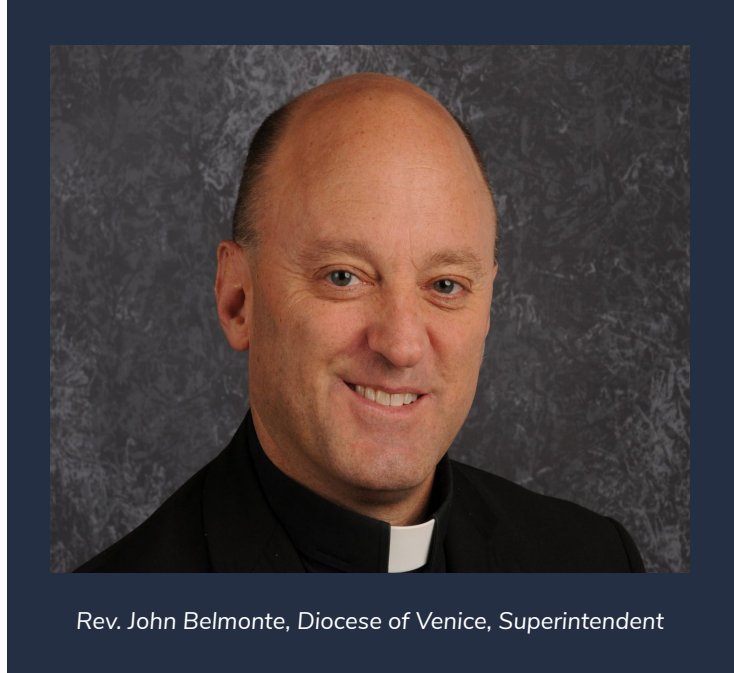
Spotlight: Diocese of Venice

If Florida is a hot spot for Catholic school enrollment nationally, then the Diocese of Venice is on fire. Its enrollment is up 30.4 percent over the past 10 years, and all 16 of its schools now have wait lists.

“When people ask me how things are going, I tell them I’ve run out of room,” said Rev. John Belmonte, the diocesan superintendent, who previously served as superintendent of the Diocese of Joliet in Illinois. “It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before.”

The Diocese of Venice encompasses Southwest Florida, including [some of the state’s fastest-growing counties](#).¹⁷ But it’s not population growth that’s driving the spikes in enrollment.

The diocese has been relentless in raising awareness about the widespread availability of school choice and education choice scholarships. During enrollment season in the spring, Belmonte said his office texted and emailed 1 million messages to Catholic families within the borders of the diocese.



Rev. John Belmonte, Diocese of Venice, Superintendent

“People are saying, ‘I can’t believe you’re communicating with me on my cell phone,’ “ Belmonte said. “They’re shocked.”

Clearly, the outreach efforts are working. And there are no plans to pause.

The diocese is in the process of converting one of its schools, Incarnation Catholic School in Sarasota, into a classical school, in response to growing parental demand for that kind of rigorous curriculum. In doing so, Incarnation will join another Catholic classical school in the diocese, the highly regarded Rhodora J. Donahue Catholic Academy in Ave Maria. Belmonte also sees promise in expanding into underserved parts of the diocese where there are currently no Catholic schools.

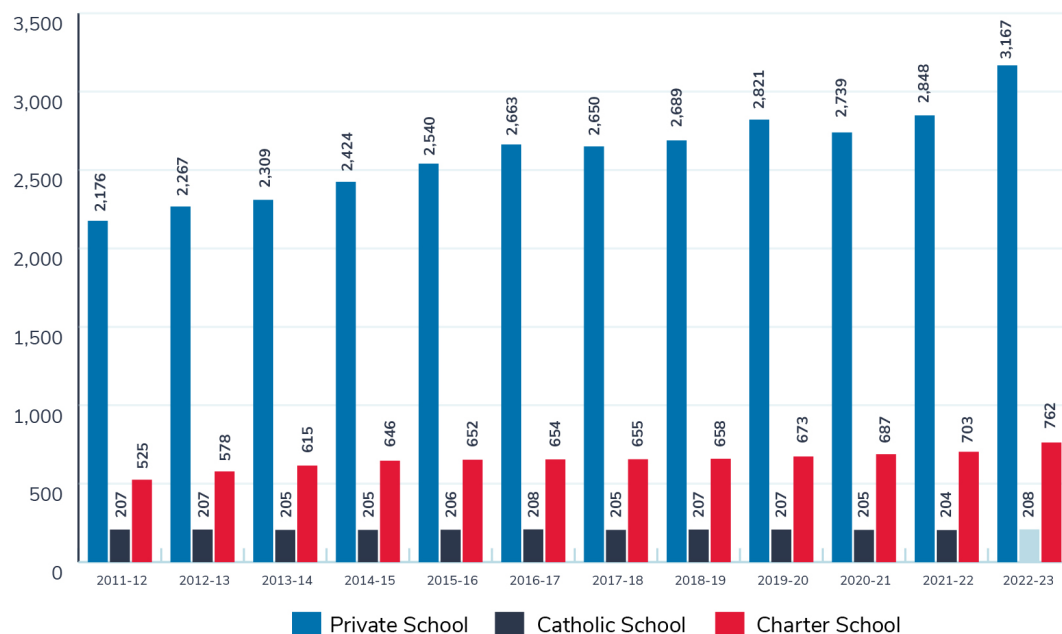
Dioceses in other states with new or expanded choice programs may want to keep tabs on how things continue to unfold in this stretch of Florida.

5 Things to Know: Competition

If you step outside St. James Catholic School in North Miami and type “schools near me” into your phone’s Google app, a flood of options emerge. Within four miles are at least seven district-run magnet schools, specializing in everything from robotics to law studies to dance; at least six charter schools, including two that earned A grades from the state; and at least seven private schools that accept choice scholarships, including a Montessori school, a Lutheran school, and another Catholic school. Expand the radius a few more miles and more choices surface, including a KIPP charter school.

In the span of a generation, school choice in Florida went from fringe to mainstream. Between 2011-12 and 2021-22 alone, the number of private schools and charter schools both grew by about a third. (See Figure 7). Meanwhile, total enrollment across all sectors increased by about 7 percent over that span.¹⁸

Figure 7. Number of private, charter, and Catholic schools in Florida, 2013-2022.



Source: Florida Department of Education.

Former Miami-Dade Superintendent Alberto Carvalho summed up the new dynamic this way: He likened school choice to a tsunami and said his district had a choice: It could try to outrun the wave – and get flattened. Or it could adapt. “Rather than complain about the incoming tsunami of choice,” Carvalho said, “we’re going to ride it.”¹⁹

The elevation of choice doesn’t just put pressure on public school districts. With more and better options every day, every provider must up their game. This is the competitive educational environment Florida Catholic schools face every day – and, to date, where they have responded well.

As another example, the enrollment at St. James Catholic School in North Miami – the school noted above – has climbed from 390 to 450 over the past decade.

Spotlight: Christ the King Catholic School, Jacksonville

A red apple is the symbol for school. But for [Christ the King Catholic School](#) in Jacksonville, a green apple is more fitting.

The PreK-8 school emphasizes environmental stewardship as core to its programming. Among other projects, the students grow vegetables with an aquaponic system; maintain a nectar garden for bees and butterflies; and monitor pollution in an ecologically sensitive creek that runs next to the school property. Along the way, they're immersed in hands-on, interdisciplinary learning that is rich with real-world connections.

This vision is tied to science and faith. Christ the King was the first to receive STREAM accreditation (STREAM stands for science, technology, religion, engineering, art, and math) from the Florida Catholic Conference – and its dedication to that full menu is obvious.

Fourth graders have worked with solar panels. Eighth graders have picked crops alongside farm workers. Sixth graders built a pulley to help those workers lift heavy buckets of produce onto trucks.

In 2021, Christ the King was recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as a Green Ribbon School, one of only 27 in America that year, and the only one in Florida.

In its application, the school noted its programming is rooted in Catholic social teaching.

Those teachings “guide one’s decisions towards the betterment of our fellow man and our environment,” the school wrote. “We are building a culture of STEM and environmental stewardship at CTK that allows students to tackle local problems, be creative in designing a solution, and communicate their ideas through actions and words.”

Growing numbers of families like what they see. Christ the King is serving 360 students this fall, up from 220 students a decade ago. All are using state-funded choice scholarships.



Students at Christ the King work on a wide range of environmental, agricultural, and science-based projects. The U.S. Department of Education designated it a Green Ribbon school in 2021 for its commitment to environmental education. The U.S. DOE had previously designated it a Blue Ribbon school, for academic excellence, in 2010.

5 Things to Know: Innovation

St. Stephen Catholic School was built 22 years ago in the suburbs east of Tampa, a fast-growing area booming not just with new homes but with highly rated district and charter schools. The PreK-8 school has always done well academically but five years ago decided to take it up a notch. After careful research, it adopted a content-rich language arts curriculum called Wit & Wisdom

The result: Within three years, the percentage of students reading at grade level or above had risen from 69 percent to 85 percent. And the school had another selling point to add to its list of superlatives.

Not coincidentally, St. Stephen has more than 100 students on its waiting list.

“We’re very proud that we have a very rigorous curriculum,” said principal Linda Umoh. “It’s something we definitely talk about and promote.”

What St. Stephen did is not unusual for Catholic schools in Florida. In order to stand out on a landscape where parents have more choices every day, many Catholic schools here are offering distinctive programming on top of the core features that have always made Catholic schools attractive and effective.



St. Stephen had 275 students in PreK-8 in 2022-23. It's expecting more than 300 this fall. A rigorous, content-rich curriculum that the school adopted five years ago has added to its selling points.

At least 11 Florida Catholic schools offer [International Baccalaureate programs](#).²⁰ The two Cristo Rey schools offer a unique brand of work study. Florida boasts a Notre Dame ACE Academy school at [St. Luke Catholic School](#) in the Diocese of Palm Beach, and a federally designated Green Ribbon school at [Christ the King](#) in the Diocese of St. Augustine. The Florida Catholic Conference has also certified 15 schools that meet [its benchmarks for a STREAM curriculum](#), meaning high-quality instruction in science, technology, religion, engineering, the arts, and math.²¹

Innovative approaches are not limited to Catholic schools in the cities and suburbs, either. [Hope Rural School](#), in the Diocese of Palm Beach, has delivered a high-quality Catholic education to the children of agricultural workers near Lake Okeechobee, in one of the most remote parts of Florida, for more than 40 years. Among other distinctive features, it offers bilingual teachers, adult education classes, a scholarship fund for alums who go to college, and a community garden where families frequently hold cookouts.²² To the north, the Diocese of St. Augustine recently established a [“Rural Education Initiative”](#) to provide transportation to Catholic school students who live in rural areas too sparsely populated to support Catholic schools.²³

Examples like these counter widespread myths that school choice “can’t work” in rural areas. It also provides evidence that Catholic schools in choice-rich environments become even more responsive and creative.

Spotlight: The Archdiocese of Miami Virtual Catholic School

The [Archdiocese of Miami Virtual Catholic School \(ADOM-VCS\)](#) began in 2013 with six students in a single school in another state. Now it serves more than 800 students every semester across 125 schools in more than 20 states, and even some students in the Turks and Caicos Islands and France.

The overriding goal: To expand the course offerings of Catholic schools anywhere.

“Catholic schools have seen if they partner with us, it does enhance their school,” said ADOM-VCS Principal Rebeca Bautista. “They can say we don’t have a limit on the courses we offer.”

ADOM-VCS serves students across grades K-12, both full-time and part-time. The asynchronous offerings – more than 160 last year – include everything from core academic classes, to 16 Advanced Placement classes, to a wide range of electives and theology courses. ADOM-VCS even offers classes for teachers seeking certification in catechist formation.

The model is all about flexibility, too. Some students need virtual classes to accommodate schedules for athletic or artistic endeavors; others because they and/or their families are navigating medical challenges. Unlike other virtual options, ADOM-VCS courses are always steeped in Catholic identity and taught by Catholic teachers.

There is no doubt the innovation here goes hand-in-hand with competition.

“We offer our curriculum, our different programs, our different options all across the nation so that Catholic schools can enhance the curriculum and make sure that they’re able to offer all of the courses, all of the electives, all of the options that charter, private and public schools are able to offer,” Bautista said in [this podcast](#).

“If the virtual school enrollment is growing, it means Catholic school education enrollment is also growing. Which is really what we want,” she added.

It’s likely ADOM-VCS would be enrolling even more students, but for an apparent glitch in state law that largely restricts [faith-based virtual education providers from receiving funds from choice scholarships](#).²⁴ Choice supporters hope to see the language remedied in the next legislative session, which begins Jan. 9.



Archdiocese of Miami Virtual Catholic School students like these can now take a number of online courses to supplement the classes at their brick-and-mortar Catholic schools. ADOM-VCS courses are steeped in Catholic identity and taught by Catholic teachers.

Discussion

The story of Catholic schools in Florida should help spur deeper discussions about how Catholic schools can regain traction elsewhere in America.

Catholic education in Florida is growing. The students the schools serve are more diverse than ever. The programming they offer is more diversified than ever. They're innovating in perhaps the most competitive education environment in America. And they're doing it all while staying true to a core mission and identity that have made them vibrant and vital community institutions for generations.



Bishop William Wack from the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee joins in on the fun running around with the students at Trinity Catholic School in Tallahassee.

We are reminded time and again of their value.

Catholic schools have long provided a top-notch education at low cost, and enabled access to many of the most disadvantaged students. But their collective performance during the pandemic – [holding student performance steady while other sectors saw tragic losses](#)²⁵ – is just the latest evidence of the “Catholic school advantage.”

One of the lessons from Catholic schools in Florida is that if the playing field is levelled, parents will choose that advantage. But it's also true that in that choice-rich environment, no school can rest on its laurels.

There are unprecedented opportunities ahead.

The expansion of education choice now unfolding across the country is historic. The passage of universal or near-universal choice programs in Arizona, West Virginia, Iowa, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Indiana, and other states means more parents than ever will be able to choose the learning options they think are best for their children.

Catholic schools will most certainly be a crucial part of the mix.

Just how much will depend on how well they adapt to ever more dynamic environments with ever more options. The experience of Catholic schools in Florida suggests they are more than capable.

Appendix A: Catholic School PreK-12 Enrollment Trends by State

Catholic School Enrollment by State 2012-13 through 2022-23													
State	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Change	% Change
Alabama	12,283	12,290	12,605	12,230	11,905	11,533	10,992	10,602	9,353	9,831	9,546	-2,737	-22%
Alaska	940	951	935	906	958	1,001	992	942	689	909	869	-71	-8%
Arizona	20,313	20,387	19,868	20,282	20,604	20,693	20,647	20,429	20,322	20,761	20,817	504	2%
Arkansas	6,913	6,790	6,889	6,776	6,799	6,706	6,643	6,498	6,143	6,293	6,428	-485	-7%
California	212,842	212,918	210,788	210,971	207,925	204,239	199,529	196,117	177,331	186,473	187,101	-25,741	-12%
Colorado	15,686	15,682	15,226	15,103	15,100	15,038	15,033	14,746	15,205	15,989	15,979	293	2%
Connecticut	31,704	30,508	29,174	27,949	26,838	25,391	23,861	22,030	20,134	20,546	20,648	-11,056	-35%
Delaware	11,257	10,750	10,418	10,391	10,092	9,805	9,685	9,420	8,520	8,675	8,885	-2,372	-21%
Florida	82,623	83,159	82,816	84,084	84,554	84,540	83,489	83,106	77,689	82,615	86,267	3,644	4%
Georgia	16,757	16,685	16,546	16,537	16,608	16,348	16,096	15,445	15,260	15,581	15,578	-1,179	-7%
Hawaii	9,342	9,110	9,163	8,923	8,911	8,604	8,119	7,503	6,726	7,014	6,640	-2,702	-29%
Idaho	3,001	3,073	3,171	3,175	3,290	3,499	3,590	3,709	3,715	4,057	4,048	1,047	35%
Illinois	148,879	147,003	144,167	140,285	135,456	130,123	126,814	122,286	112,258	116,182	114,936	-33,943	-23%
Indiana	56,600	56,331	56,605	55,908	55,623	55,212	54,317	52,325	48,586	50,884	52,628	-3,972	-7%
Iowa	28,953	28,650	28,926	29,270	28,964	28,704	28,269	27,764	26,565	27,187	26,868	-2,085	-7%
Kansas	29,335	28,916	28,629	28,365	28,280	27,974	27,469	27,262	25,753	26,540	26,674	-2,661	-9%
Kentucky	37,650	37,237	36,710	36,362	36,424	36,277	35,332	34,745	33,343	34,815	34,764	-2,886	-8%
Louisiana	81,121	80,692	79,745	78,540	76,945	75,238	73,812	72,215	69,176	69,559	70,317	-10,804	-13%
Maine	3,097	3,016	2,965	2,858	2,653	2,533	2,347	1,587	2,104	2,288	2,273	-824	-27%
Maryland	27,118	26,160	25,633	25,287	25,105	24,727	23,861	23,643	23,400	24,297	24,727	-2,391	-9%
Massachusetts	60,357	58,508	57,057	56,331	53,800	51,402	48,899	46,786	43,236	46,235	46,116	-14,241	-24%
Michigan	56,252	55,530	53,994	53,681	53,027	51,297	50,257	48,246	46,332	49,215	50,386	-5,866	-10%
Minnesota	47,449	46,463	44,771	43,554	43,082	42,914	42,642	41,774	41,526	44,830	45,342	-2,107	-4%
Mississippi	8,293	8,219	7,922	7,723	7,693	7,675	7,476	7,391	6,947	7,584	7,521	-772	-9%
Missouri	65,638	64,007	62,520	61,379	59,838	58,403	57,574	56,486	53,971	55,612	55,780	-9,858	-15%
Montana	3,719	3,727	3,900	3,880	3,886	3,791	3,830	3,845	3,588	3,743	3,848	129	3%
Nebraska	28,574	28,323	27,898	28,868	29,219	29,057	28,847	28,391	26,745	27,100	27,118	-1,456	-5%
Nevada	5,680	5,658	5,645	5,665	5,590	5,462	5,322	5,165	5,392	5,498	5,585	-95	-2%
New Hampshire	6,615	6,472	6,104	5,804	5,617	5,363	5,415	5,185	5,304	5,649	5,678	-937	-14%
New Jersey	89,403	86,863	82,978	80,303	76,578	72,957	69,392	65,497	58,653	60,923	59,645	-29,758	-33%
New Mexico	6,112	6,496	6,284	6,239	5,877	5,811	5,653	5,447	4,978	5,129	4,516	-1,596	-26%
New York	187,337	180,728	175,677	170,717	165,651	159,447	153,606	145,858	132,822	133,887	129,893	-57,444	-31%
North Carolina	16,700	16,440	16,621	16,504	16,361	16,089	16,051	16,000	15,686	16,849	17,451	751	4%
North Dakota	4,370	4,743	4,647	4,722	4,813	4,802	4,960	4,980	4,997	5,277	5,203	833	19%
Ohio	135,433	133,501	131,139	129,349	127,176	125,688	123,749	121,315	116,654	118,859	118,861	-16,572	-12%
Oklahoma	9,431	9,567	9,599	9,627	9,579	9,515	9,710	9,575	8,925	9,051	9,160	-271	-3%
Oregon	15,215	15,421	15,521	15,447	15,201	15,262	15,249	15,136	14,322	15,606	15,513	298	2%
Pennsylvania	139,002	136,124	132,726	131,018	126,771	122,569	117,290	111,835	103,464	105,432	104,108	-34,894	-25%
Rhode Island	13,390	13,100	12,671	11,767	11,428	10,825	10,367	9,918	9,192	9,637	9,612	-3,778	-28%
South Carolina	7,062	6,988	7,085	7,206	7,273	7,164	7,042	6,908	6,981	7,157	7,523	461	7%
South Dakota	5,952	5,896	5,880	5,814	5,545	5,729	5,649	5,579	5,328	5,449	5,386	-566	-10%
Tennessee	17,818	17,372	16,859	16,728	16,384	16,196	15,519	13,844	12,658	13,897	14,435	-3,383	-19%
Texas	78,340	78,433	78,070	77,188	74,967	71,887	70,022	67,348	60,626	62,256	64,243	-14,097	-18%
Utah	5,582	5,454	5,327	5,441	5,231	5,209	5,016	4,757	4,362	4,757	4,848	-734	-13%
Vermont	2,107	2,090	2,040	1,997	1,979	1,944	1,951	1,908	1,835	2,006	1,972	-135	-6%
Virginia	26,725	26,765	26,456	26,556	26,541	26,290	25,947	25,518	25,061	27,269	27,717	992	4%

Catholic School Enrollment by State 2012-13 through 2022-23

State	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Change	% Change
Washington	28,874	28,517	28,042	28,145	28,049	27,677	25,795	26,748	25,221	26,989	27,029	-1,845	-6%
Washington D.C.	27,720	27,302	26,960	26,822	26,856	26,254	26,171	25,693	24,374	25,557	26,074	-1,646	-6%
West Virginia	5,803	5,690	5,640	5,667	5,448	5,112	4,965	4,627	4,045	4,259	4,422	-1,381	-24%
Wisconsin	59,411	58,893	57,559	56,518	55,411	54,427	53,090	52,226	50,054	51,497	51,723	-7,688	-13%
Wyoming	962	980	1,003	974	919	973	1,010	937	740	712	792	-170	-18%
United States	2,001,740	1,974,578	1,939,574	1,915,836	1,878,824	1,835,376	1,789,363	1,737,297	1,626,291	1,688,417	1,693,493	-308,247	-15.4%

Source: National Catholic Educational Association

Appendix B: Florida's Array of Education Choice Scholarships

Florida has been home to one of the nation's most robust and diverse array of school choice and education choice scholarships. Now it has "universal choice."

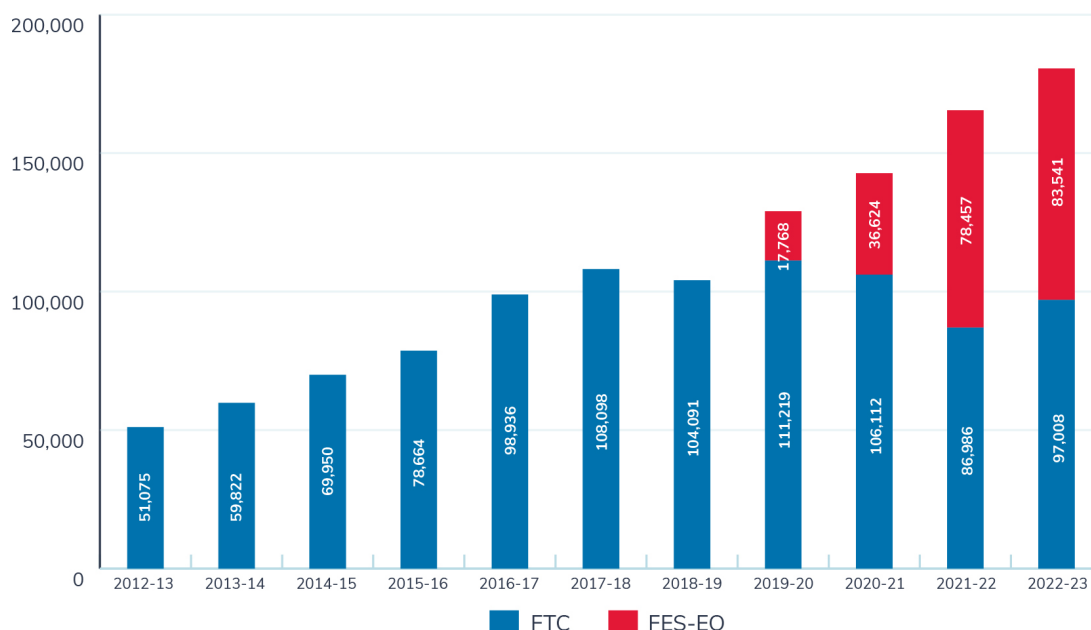
In March 2023, the Florida Legislature passed House Bill 1, which makes every student in Florida – all 3.4 million at present, and all students going forward – eligible for a state-funded education savings account (ESAs). Gov. Ron DeSantis signed the bill into law on March 27 at Christopher Columbus High School, a Catholic school in Miami.

ESAs are similar to school vouchers or tax-credit scholarships, except parents can use them to purchase more than just tuition and fees.

There are still several different types of ESA scholarships in Florida.

Scholarships for Educational Options. Under this category, there are two scholarships: [The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship](#) (FTC) and the [Family Empowerment Scholarship for Educational Options](#) (FES-EO). The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship was created in 2001 and is funded by corporate contributions in return for dollar-for-dollar tax credits. The Family Empowerment Scholarship for Educational Options was created in 2019 and is funded directly by the state. Both previously had eligibility limits based on family income, but those limits were eliminated under HB 1. Funding priority is still given to students in low-income households. Both scholarships are worth the same amount; the average ranges between \$7,430 and \$8,120 per school year, depending on grade level and county of residence. The following chart reflects how the number of these scholarships has grown statewide. (See Figure 8)

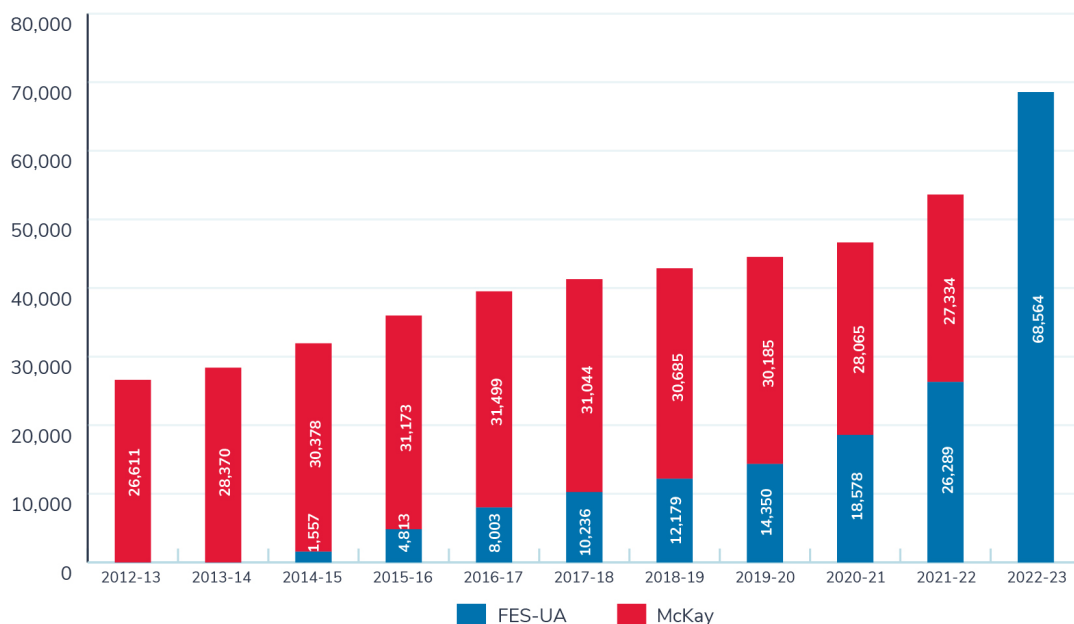
Figure 8. Growth in Florida scholarships for educational options, 2013-2023.



Source: Florida Department of Education and Step Up For Students. Note: The 2022-23 figure is not official. It is based on Step Up For Students' data and does not include a small number of scholarships administered by another scholarship funding organization.

Scholarships for Students with Unique Abilities. Florida created an ESA for students with special needs in 2014. It is now called the [Family Empowerment Scholarship for Students with Unique Abilities \(FES-UA\)](#). In 2022, that program absorbed the McKay Scholarship, a private school choice scholarship for students with disabilities that was created in 2001 but converted into an ESA in 2022. The FES-UA is worth about \$10,000 per year. The following chart reflects how the number of these scholarships has grown statewide. (See Figure 9)

Figure 9. Growth in Florida special needs scholarships, 2013-2023.



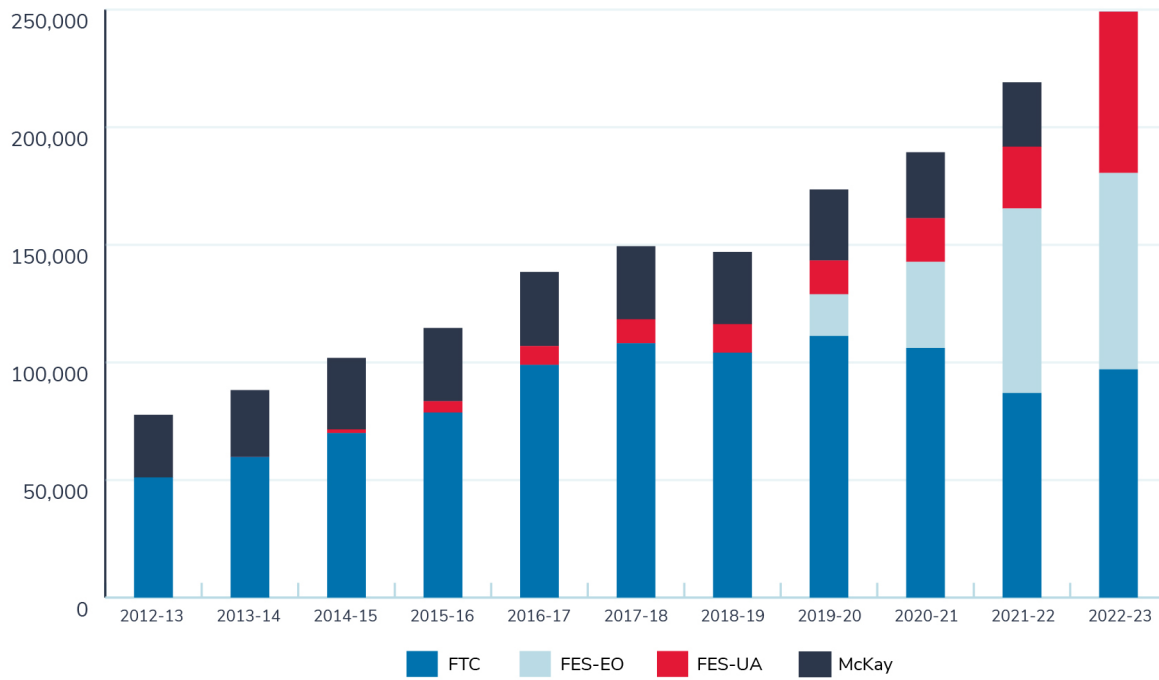
Source: Florida Department of Education and Step Up For Students. Note: The 2022-23 figure is not official. It is based on Step Up For Students' data and does not include a small number of scholarships administered by another scholarship funding organization.

Personalized Education Program. HB 1 also created a new opportunity for parent-directed education using state-funded ESAs. The [Personalized Education Program, or PEP](#), is a subset of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program, and it will be funded using FTC funds. It is available to up to 20,000 students in the fall of 2023, and up to 40,000 additional students each subsequent year through 2027, after which the program participation cap will be removed. The PEP scholarships are valued the same as the FTC and FES-EO scholarships

Other scholarships. Florida also has a school choice scholarship for students who have experienced bullying or harassment in public schools. The [Hope Scholarship](#) was created in 2018. It's funded by people who contribute \$105 of their sales taxes from motor vehicle purchases. It is also worth the same as the FTC and FESEO scholarships. The number of students using the scholarship has been relatively small.

The following chart reflects the breakdown of total Florida scholarship growth over time (excluding Hope). (See Figure 10)

Figure 10. Florida choice scholarship growth, 2013-2023.



Source: Florida Department of Education and Step Up For Students. Note: The 2022-23 figure is not official. It is based on Step Up For Students' data and does not include a small number of scholarships administered by another scholarship funding organization.

About the Authors



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Lauren May is Director of Advocacy at Step Up for Students. As a proud graduate of the University of Florida, she received her Bachelor's Degree in Special Education and Master of Education in Early Childhood Education. She then completed another Master of Education in Educational Leadership from St. Leo University. A former Catholic school teacher, early childhood director and principal, she was honored with University of Florida's "Outstanding Young Alumni" award in 2018. As a believer that parents are the first and best educators of their children, Lauren loves working with families across the state and beyond to ensure they are able to find and make use of the best educational options for their children.



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Patrick Gibbons is Senior Manager, Public Affairs, at Step Up For Students. Patrick joined Step Up in 2013 and has 18 years of experience with education and school choice. Prior to Step Up, Patrick worked with EdChoice, Nevada Policy Research Institute, Goldwater Institute, and the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs, and taught history at a public school in Virginia.



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Ron Matus is Director, Research & Special Projects, at Step Up For Students. He joined Step Up in 2012 after more than 20 years as an award-winning journalist, including eight years as the state education reporter for the Tampa Bay Times, the state's biggest and most influential newspaper.

About Step Up For Students



Step Up For Students is a nonprofit that administers four education choice scholarship programs in Florida: the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, the Family Empowerment Scholarship, the Hope Scholarship, and the New Worlds Scholarship Accounts.

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Notes

1. That figure for public schools is from the Florida PK-20 Education Information Portal, on the Florida Department of Education website.
2. Gibbons, P. (2016, May 20). The Sisters of St. Joseph. reimaginED. <https://www.reimaginedonline.org/2016/05/catholic-sisters-arrested-teaching-blacks/>
3. The winning candidate for Florida governor was Sidney J. Catts. The winning candidate for U.S. Senate was Florida Gov. Park Trammel.
4. St. Benedict the Moor closed in 1964, when public school in St. Augustine desegregated.
5. Here are the URLs to all three stories: <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/253675/new-york-archdiocese-to-close-12-catholic-schools>; <https://www.dispatch.com/story/news/2023/05/25/columbus-catholic-diocese-to-lose-15-churches-in-bishops-closure-plan/70252106007/>; https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/education/st-rose-in-florissant-is-third-catholic-grade-school-to-close-this-fall/article_a1b800d4-144a-11ee-b9a1-d3e392723e06.html.
6. This map shows percentage change in population state by state between 2010 and 2020, according to U.S. Census Bureau data: <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/data/apportionment/apportionment-2020-map03.pdf>. This map similarly shows the state-by-state change for the under-18 population over that span: <https://usafacts.org/articles/the-us-child-population-shrank-by-1-million-between-2010-and-2020/>
7. That figure is from a Step Up For Students analysis conducted in 2019.
8. Gibbons, P. (2023, January 24). Florida's changing landscape: 1.6 million students in Sunshine State choose education choice. reimaginED. <https://www.reimaginedonline.org/2023/01/floridas-changing-landscape-1-6-million-students-in-sunshine-state-choose-education-choice/>
9. Miami-Dade County Public Schools calculates the figure to be 73.7 percent, according to its website: <https://yourchoicemiami.org/>. However, the district figure does not include private schools and home education. Including those sectors, according to our calculations, brings the total to nearly 80 percent.
10. Figlio, D. (2021). Evidence of a Catholic School Advantage in Nonpublic Scholarship Programs for Low-Income Families. Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/105270/evidence-of-a-catholic-school-advantage-in-nonpublic-scholarship-programs-for-low-income-families.pdf>
11. For a summary of those test score analyses, go here: [21.9.1-FSU-Report-of-FTC-Testing.pdf](https://www.stepupforstudents.org/21.9.1-FSU-Report-of-FTC-Testing.pdf) ([stepupforstudents.org](https://www.stepupforstudents.org/)). To see all of the annual test score reports going back to 2006-07, go here: <https://www.fldoe.org/schools/school-choice/facts-figures.shtml>
12. For more on the expansion of The Basilica School: <https://www.reimaginedonline.org/2022/03/key-wests-only-catholic-school-plans-expansion-to-accommodate-enrollment-growth/>
13. For more on the St. Malachy re-opening: https://www.miamiarch.org/CatholicDiocese.php?op=Article_archdiocese-of-miami-st-malachy-school-reopen-fall-2023
14. For more on Cristo Rey coming to Orlando: <https://www.reimaginedonline.org/2023/02/catholic-high-school-network-receives-donation-of-orlando-property-for-third-florida-campus/>
15. <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/ltt/2022/>

16. Ladner, M. (2022, September 1). NAEP reveals students starting with the least suffered the most in Covid-19 shutdowns. reimaginED. <https://www.reimaginedonline.org/2022/09/naep-reveals-students-starting-with-the-least-suffered-the-most-in-covid-19-shutdowns/>
17. Good rundown on the fastest-growing areas in Florida in this Tampa Bay Times piece: <https://www.tampabay.com/opinion/2023/05/11/here-are-floridas-fastest-growing-cities-counties-five-charts/>
18. Total enrollment across public, private, and home education sectors in Florida increased from 3,162,741 in 2011-12 to 3,401,372 in 2021-22, an increase of 7.5 percent, according to information available on the Florida Department of Education website. As of June 22, 2023, the 2022-23 figures were not publicly available across all sectors.
19. More on choice and competition in Miami-Dade: <https://www.educationnext.org/miami-choice-tsunami-carvalho-competition-transformation-miami-dade/>
20. All the IB schools in Florida can be found here: <https://flibs.org/Schools.cfm>
21. More on STREAM accreditation for Florida Catholic schools here: <https://eas-ed.org/stream-schools-1>
22. Story on Hope Rural School in the Diocese of Palm Beach: <https://www.reimaginedonline.org/2022/04/yes-school-choice-works-in-rural-areas/>
23. Story on the Rural Education Initiative in the Diocese of St. Augustine: <https://www.stepupforstudents.org/blog/the-bus-ride-to-school-is-long-but-the-opportunity-for-a-catholic-education-is-well-worth-the-trip/>
24. For more on the complications: <https://www.reimaginedonline.org/2023/06/religious-virtual-schools-in-florida-hoping-to-reap-benefits-of-hb1/>
25. Stoll, I. (2022, October 24). Catholic Schools Are a Rare Bright Spot in Nation's Report Card 2022 Data. Education Next. <https://www.educationnext.org/catholic-schools-are-a-rare-bright-spot-in-nations-report-card-2022-data/>