



Controlling the Narrative:

Parental Choice, Black Empowerment & Lessons From Florida



AMERICAN
FEDERATION *for*
Children



BLACK
MINDS
MATTER



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Controlling the Narrative: Parental Choice, Black Empowerment & Lessons From Florida

Summary

It has been 31 years since the first modern private school choice program began in Milwaukee, 29 years since the first charter school opened in Minnesota, and 10 years since Arizona created the nation's first education savings account program. Yet in many states, the opportunity for America's 7.7 million Black public-school students to access these potentially life-changing learning options remains out of reach.¹

Florida is a notably bright exception.

Florida has more than 600,000 Black students, among the highest number of any state.² It has among the most expansive suite of education choice options.³ And now it has among the highest number of Black students enrolled in those options.

The latter shouldn't be a surprise. Black student achievement across America continues to lag.⁴ Black residents are more likely to have negative views of neighborhood schools.⁵ Black parents are particularly supportive of school choice.⁶ Yet the extent to which Black parents, educators and communities have embraced choice in Florida has been little noticed by the press, policymakers and the general public, both in Florida and beyond.

This paper seeks to spotlight those trend lines, and to highlight evidence of their positive impact on Black students. It calls attention to Black educators who have been empowered by choice to innovate. And it seeks to spur discussion in states where Black parents continue to have few meaningful choices.

1. [COE - Racial/Ethnic Enrollment in Public Schools \(ed.gov\)](#)

2. In 2017-18, Florida had 626,289 Black students in public schools, ranking it third among states behind Texas and Georgia. [Civil Rights Data Collection \(ed.gov\)](#)

3. [2021 EdChoice Share: Where Are America's Students Getting Their Education? - EdChoice](#)

4. [Black Students in the Condition of Education 2020 \(nsba.org\)](#)

5. [New survey of minorities adds dissenting view to public satisfaction with schools \(brookings.edu\)](#)

6. [Public Opinion Tracker Deep Dive: Perspectives of Black K-12 Parents \(April 2021\) - EdChoice](#)

Among the key takeaways:

- **Black parents want options.** In the 2020-21 school year, 112,662 Black students in Florida – about 17 percent of the total – were enrolled in non-district options that did not exist a generation ago, including charter schools, private schools via state-supported scholarships, and home education using state-funded education savings accounts. This figure does not include Black students attending district-run schools of choice such as magnet schools.
- **Demand continues to grow.** Rising enrollment across multiple choice programs isn't the only indicator. As but one example, the number of applications completed for Black students seeking income-based private school choice scholarships tripled over the past decade.
- **Better outcomes in choice schools.** Black students in Florida charter schools outperform their counterparts in Florida district schools, according to state and federal test data. Meanwhile, academic data for Florida's main private school choice program, while not broken down by race, shows participants enrolling in college and earning degrees at significantly higher rates than like students in district schools.
- **Better outcomes in district schools.** As choice expands, Black students who remain in Florida district schools are also making strong academic gains, both outpacing Black students nationally and narrowing "achievement gaps" with white students in Florida.
- **Opportunities for Black educators.** The growth of choice in Florida has bolstered opportunities for Black educators, with thousands more now teaching in Florida choice schools and a growing number founding and/or are leading their own schools. In one state senate district in the city of Jacksonville alone, there are now 26 Black-owned private schools.

Introduction

In 1904, Mary McLeod Bethune opened a private school for Black girls in Daytona Beach with \$1.50 to her name. Her vision for an alternative to sub-par public schools was shaped by her brilliance, tenacity and faith – and by her own educational experience. She attended three private, faith-based schools as a student. She taught at three private, faith-based schools before building her own. In every case, support for those schools came from private contributions, religious institutions, and the Black communities they served. Backers wanted Black students to find pathways to life-long success – and to freedom.

Florida’s public schools have come a long way since then, especially in the past quarter century. By some common academic indicators, they are now among the best in America,⁷ with the rising achievement of students of color being a leading reason for this progress.⁸

At the same time, unconscionable gaps persist. In 2021, barely 1 in 3 Black 10th-graders in Florida were proficient in reading. In three of Florida’s big urban districts, barely 1 in 4 were.⁹

It is against this backdrop that Florida began opening the doors to school choice. In 1996, Florida passed its first charter school law. In 1999, it created the Opportunity Scholarship, the nation’s first modern, statewide private school voucher. In 2001, it created the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, which would become the nation’s largest private school choice program. In 2014, it created what is now the nation’s largest education savings account program. In 2019, it created another means-tested private school choice scholarship, the Family Empowerment Scholarship, with direct state funding and more potential for growth. In 2021, it expanded nearly all of the above.

In response, Florida public school districts have ramped up their own choice offerings, from magnet schools and career academies to dual enrollment and International Baccalaureate programs. Forty-five percent of K-12 students in Florida now attend something other than their zoned neighborhood schools.¹⁰ In the Miami-Dade school district – now one of the nation’s top-performing urban districts, and one with more than 64,000 Black students – it’s 74 percent.¹¹

7. Florida ranks No. 3 in America in K-12 Achievement, according to the annual Quality Counts report from Education Week. Florida ranks No. 2 in the percentage of graduating seniors who have passed Advanced Placement exams, according to the College Board. Florida students rank No. 1, No. 1, No. 3 and No. 8 on the four core National Assessment of Educational Progress tests, once adjusted for demographics, according to the Urban Institute.

8. [Closing the Racial Achievement Gap: Learning from Florida’s Reforms | The Heritage Foundation](#)

9. Florida Standards Assessment data can be found on Florida’s PK-20 Education Information Portal

10. [Once again, charter schools dominate Florida’s education choice landscape - reimagineED \(reimaginedonline.org\)](#)

11. <https://yourchoicemiami.org>

From the beginning, Black parental choice advocates have been integral to this expansion. T. Willard Fair, president and CEO of the Urban League of Greater Miami, co-founded Florida's first charter school in 1996 with Jeb Bush, who would become governor two years later. In 2010, two thirds of the Florida Legislature's Black Caucus voted to expand the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, ensuring it would become the nation's largest private school choice program. In 2014, when that same program was targeted by a lawsuit that threatened its existence, more than 100 Black ministers in Florida joined a coalition to formally condemn it. Two years later, more than 10,000 people, most of them Black and Hispanic, rallied against the lawsuit at the state capital, in an event headlined by Martin Luther King III.

Most importantly, it has been hundreds of thousands of Black parents who have led this shift – by enrolling their children in Florida choice programs, by “voting with their feet” and by making it so they cannot be ignored politically. This year, 12 of 21 state House districts represented by Black lawmakers, and all six state Senate districts, have more than 2,000 students each using the state's two main private school choice scholarships. One of the House districts has 4,000 students using the scholarships. Two of the Senate districts each have more than 8,000.

“Options make it so that I can have school that works for my child,” said Brandi Evans, who has three children at Icon Preparatory School, a predominantly Black private school serving choice scholarship students in Tampa. With education choice, “I get to control the narrative.”¹²

Demand

The mainstreaming of school choice and educational choice in Florida occurred in the span of a generation. Thirty years ago, 90 percent of Florida students attended their assigned district schools. Most of the rest paid tuition to attend private schools, while a handful attended district-run magnet schools.

That changed in 1996, when a strong bipartisan coalition in the Florida Legislature passed the state's charter school bill, which was signed into law by Democratic Gov. Lawton Chiles. Within months, Florida's first charter school was in operation. The Liberty City Charter School served Black students from some of Miami's most impoverished neighborhoods. Though it closed in 2008, the Liberty City charter blazed trails for parental choice that Black families and Black educators have been using to break new ground ever since.

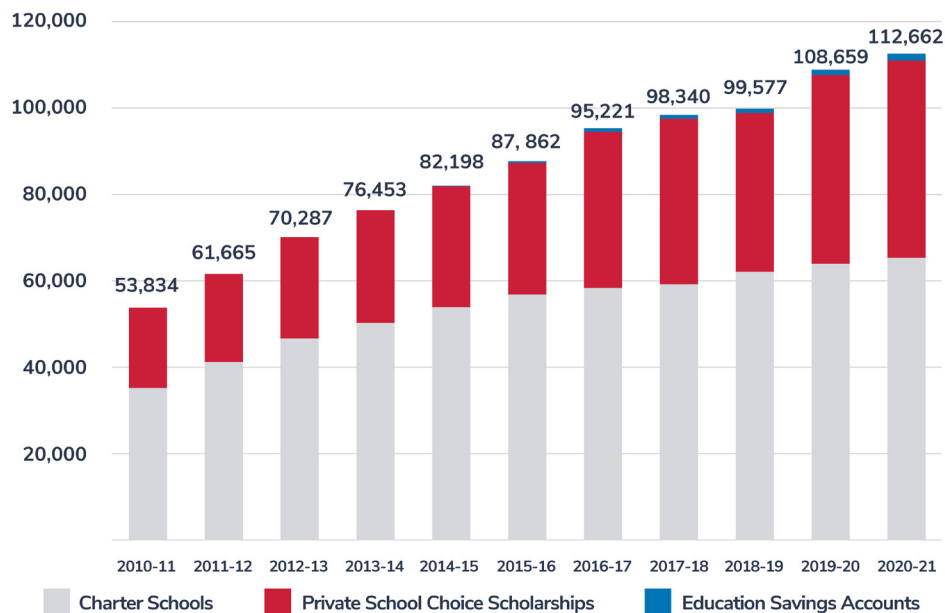
In the 2020-21 school year, 112,662 Black students in Florida were enrolled in state-supported learning options outside of school districts. (See Figure 1.) For context, consider that Florida now has more Black students enrolled in those options than 30 states have Black students, including Arkansas, Minnesota and Massachusetts.¹³

12. Interview with Ron Matus, July 2021.

13. [Civil Rights Data Collection \(ed.gov\)](#)

Collective Black student participation in these Florida choice programs has grown steadily, at a far greater rate than enrollment growth in Florida schools or in the population of Black students.¹⁴ In 2010-11, 53,834 Black students were enrolled in these programs. By 2020-21, that number had more than doubled. Proportionally, the number of Black students in Florida’s state-supported, non-district choice programs has climbed from 1 in 12 a decade ago to 1 in 6 today.

Figure 1. Black Student Enrollment in Florida's Non-district Choice Options



Source: Florida Department of Education.

While telling, enrollment numbers alone do not capture the full extent of demand. The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, for example, was for years limited by fundraising caps that prevented it from serving all families who applied. It is instructive, then, to also look at wait lists and application numbers.

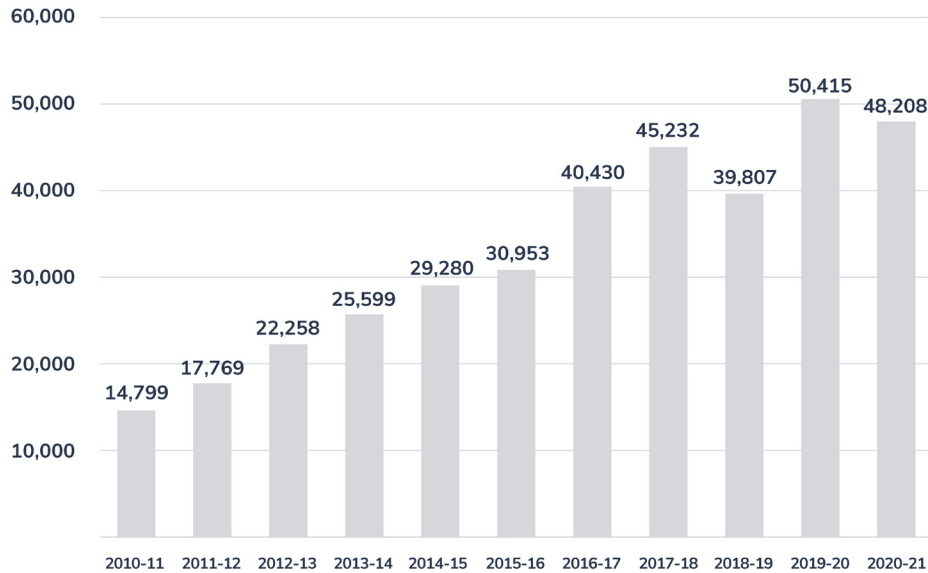
More than 100,000 students have been on wait lists for Florida charter schools in each of the past two years, according to data self-reported by charter schools to the Florida Department of Education.¹⁵ That data is not disaggregated by race. But it’s likely many of those students were Black, given Black students make up 19 percent of Florida’s total charter school enrollment.

Between 2010-11 and 2020-21, the number of applications completed for Black students seeking income-based school choice scholarships grew from 14,799 to 48,208. (See Figure 2.) The trend lines look similar for applications to the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Unique Abilities, an education savings account program formerly known as the Gardiner Scholarship. In 2014-15, the program’s first year, 184 applications were completed for Black students. In 2020-21, that number climbed to 1,759.

14. Total public and private school enrollment in Florida grew from 2,992,460 in 2010-11 to 3,156,107 in 2020-21, or 5.5 percent. Meanwhile, Black student enrollment in Florida public schools declined by 1 percent over that span, from 607,130 to 601,026.

15. The FDOE data shows 106,719 students on charter school wait lists in 2020-21, and 111,807 in 2019-20.

Figure 2. Applications Completed for Black Students Applying to Florida Income-based Scholarships



Source: Step Up For Students.

Some caveats about what this paper did not include in its count of Black student enrollment in Florida choice options:

The Hope Scholarship. Created in 2018 for students who have been victims of bullying or harassment, the Hope Scholarship remains a small program in comparison to Florida's other choice options. In the 2020-21 school year, 20 Black students used the Hope Scholarship.

Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten. Created by a voter-approved constitutional amendment in 2002, the Florida VPK program is a state-funded parental choice program and, by number of students served, one of the largest private school voucher programs in America. In 2019-20, the program served more than 170,000 students, with about 80 percent of them attending private schools and private child-care centers. A breakdown by race was not available from the Florida Department of Education.

Home education. Home schooling in Florida has been growing for years, and, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, skyrocketed in 2020-21 to 143,431 students, up 35 percent from the prior year.¹⁶ The state does not track the race and ethnicity of home education students in Florida, so it's not clear how many Black families are participating. It's also true public funding is for the most part not available for home education except through the state's education savings accounts program. Still, there is evidence of a surge in Black home schoolers nationally,¹⁷ and anecdotal evidence of the same in Florida.¹⁸

District choice. As noted earlier, Florida districts themselves have become major players in the creation of choice options. There is much useful information to be gleaned from examining the participation and achievement of Black students in magnet schools, career academies and other district choice programs, but it is beyond the narrow focus of this paper.

16. [Home-Ed-Annual-Report-2020-21 \(fldoe.org\)](#)

17. [Homeschooling on the Rise During COVID-19 Pandemic \(census.gov\)](#)

18. [Black & homeschooled - reimaginED \(reimaginedonline.org\)](#)

Outcomes for Black Students in Florida Choice Schools

Charter schools

The most respected research on charter school academic outcomes finds different outcomes for Black students depending on family income. For more affluent Black students, the Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University (CREDO) found no significant difference in math and reading achievement when compared to like students in traditional public schools, according to a 2013 study. Low-income Black students in charter schools, however, gained an additional 29 days of learning in reading and 36 days in math over like students in traditional public schools. The study concluded: “This shows the impact of charter schooling is especially beneficial for black students in poverty.”¹⁹

In Florida, Black students in charter schools outperform Black students in district schools in virtually every grade and subject on the state’s standardized tests, according to annual reports compiled by the Florida Department of Education. On the most recent report, Black students in charter schools outperformed Black students in district schools in 31 of 38 categories, which include proficiency, achievement gaps and learning gains. However, the state reports do not treat for other demographic differences and students in Florida charter schools are less likely to be lower-income or have special needs.²⁰

Another comparison is possible through the National Assessment of Educational Progress, considered the “gold standard” of standardized tests. In eighth grade reading and math, Black students in Florida charter schools are outpacing Black students in every state, according to the most recent NAEP results from 2019. (See Figures 3 and 4).

To be sure, test score outcomes for Black students in Florida charter schools weren’t always so positive. A 2009 CREDO analysis, for example, found Black students in Florida charter schools scored “significantly worse” on state tests than “matched” students in Florida district schools.²¹ However, the more recent data from NAEP, while limited, suggests Black students in Florida charter schools now have the edge. In eighth grade reading, 75 percent of low-income Black students in Florida charter schools scored at basic or above on the 2019 NAEP, compared to 52 percent of like students in district schools. In eighth grade math, the corresponding breakdown is 61 percent to 40 percent.²²

In eighth grade reading, 75 percent of low-income Black students in Florida charter schools scored at basic or above on the 2019 NAEP, compared to 52 percent of like students in district schools. In eighth grade math, the corresponding breakdown is 61 percent to 40 percent.

19. [ncss_2013_executive_summary.pdf \(stanford.edu\)](#)

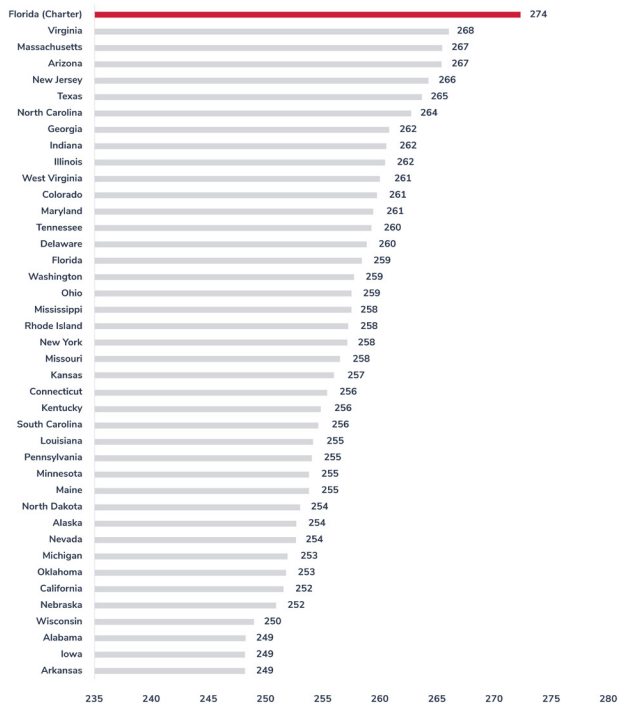
20. [SAR1920 \(fldoe.org\)](#)

21. [Microsoft Word - FL STATE TEMPLATE_090612 \(stanford.edu\)](#)

22. Both Black students and low-income Black students in Florida scored higher than their district counterparts on all four core NAEP tests. But the results were only statistically significant in eighth grade reading and math.

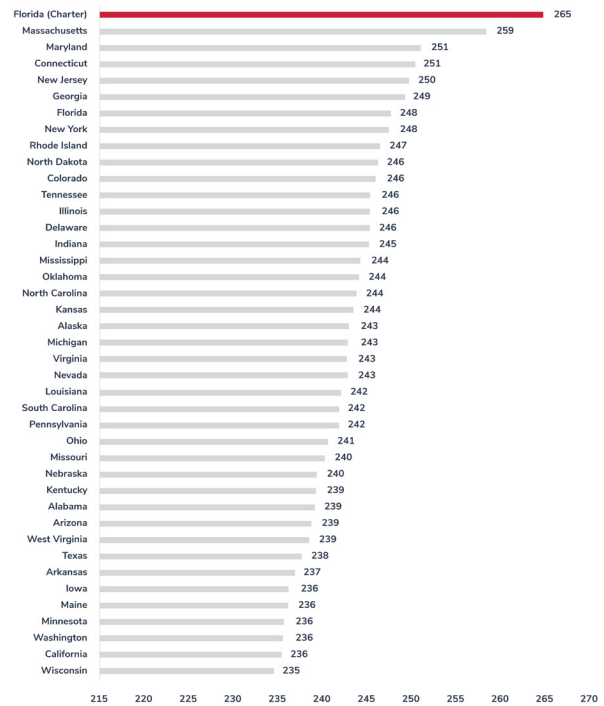
For additional context, note Florida students as a whole rank among the nation's best on those four, core NAEP tests. Once adjusted for demographics, they rank No. 1, No. 1, No. 3, and No. 8, respectively.²³ Also, Black students in Florida are outpacing their peers nationally on those tests and, in three of four of them, now rank among the top in the country. (More on that in the next section.) In other words, it appears Black students in Florida charter schools are outperforming like students in district schools who are themselves national leaders in performance.

Figure 3. Black Students in Florida Charter Schools, Black Students in Other States, Grade 8 Reading



Source: NAEP Data Explorer (using average scale scores).

Figure 4. Black Students in Florida Charter Schools, Black Students in Other States, Grade 8 Math



Source: NAEP Data Explorer (using average scale scores).

23. [America's Gradebook \(urban.org\)](http://America'sGradebook.urban.org)

Private schools

As a whole, the highest quality research – research based on random assignment methodology – shows small but positive outcomes for students using private school choice scholarships across the country. According to EdChoice, in 11 of 17 random-assignment studies examining test scores, students using choice scholarships achieved higher test scores than students who applied for but did not receive or use the scholarships. Four found no visible effects. Three found negative effects.²⁴

Seven other studies of programs in various states examined longer-term outcomes, such as high school graduation, college enrollment and/or degree attainment. Five found positive effects. Two found no effect.

One of those seven studies examined the effects of a privately funded private school voucher program in New York City in the late 1990s. The study by Matthew M. Chingos and Paul E. Peterson found no significant impact on college enrollment for participants as a whole, but a large and significant positive impact for Black students. Using the voucher to attend private school increased the college attendance rate for Black students by 24 percent.²⁵

In Florida, there is a significant and growing body of research on the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship for lower- and middle-income students. State law requires that scholarship students take norm-referenced tests in math and reading, and that the results be analyzed annually by a state-hired researcher. There are now 12 annual reports on those results. In addition, the Urban Institute has issued two reports, in 2017 and 2019, examining the effects of the scholarship on college enrollment and degree attainment.

Neither the state reports nor the Urban Institute studies break down results by race. However, about 75 percent of the students using the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship historically have been students of color, with family incomes barely above the poverty line. The most recent state data shows 30,768 of the 106,112 students who used the scholarship in 2020-21 – 29 percent – were Black.²⁶

Since the beginning, the annual state reports have offered two consistent findings: No. 1, the students on scholarship were typically the lowest-performing students in their prior public schools. No. 2, they are now making the same annual learning gains as students of all income levels nationally.²⁷ In layman's terms, students on scholarship are no longer falling further behind each year. Instead, as researcher David Figlio described it in the 2014 report: "no matter how one aggregates the test score gains, the typical participating student gained approximately a year's worth of learning in a year's time."

24. [2021-EdChoice-Study-Guide.pdf](#)

25. [Impacts_of_School_Vouchers_FINAL.pdf \(brookings.edu\)](#)

26. [FTC-Jun-2021-Q-Report \(fldoe.org\)](#)

27. All of the annual test score analyses can be found here: [Facts & Figures \(fldoe.org\)](#)

The Urban Institute found positive long-range outcomes. The 2019 report found students using the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship were up to 43 percent more likely than their low-income counterparts in public schools to enroll in four-year colleges, and up to 20 percent more likely to earn bachelor's degrees. The longer the students used the scholarship, the better the outcomes. Students using the scholarship four or more years, the researchers found, were up to 99 percent more likely to enroll in four-year colleges, and up to 45 percent more likely to earn bachelor's degrees.²⁸

Outcomes for Black Students in Florida District Schools

A common refrain among choice opponents is that expanding non-district options will hurt students who remain in district schools.

That has not been the case in Florida.

As choice has expanded, Florida students, including Black students, have made significant progress, according to the most common academic indicators. Florida public schools are now performing better than ever, and, in some cases, now rank among the best in the nation.

To be sure, many factors may have contributed to Florida's progress, and it is impossible to gauge the impact of choice alone. But it is fair to conclude the expansion of choice has not negatively impacted the performance of students in Florida district schools. And to note, at the same time, that there is compelling evidence the expansion has helped.

A 2020 report from the National Bureau of Economic Research found as the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program grew, district schools improved. Competitive pressure, the researchers concluded, spurred rising math and reading scores, lower absenteeism and fewer suspensions. Low-income students benefitted the most in all areas, the researchers found, though Black students did not see significant reductions in absences or suspensions. Interestingly, more affluent students also saw improved outcomes, leading the researchers to describe the competitive impacts as "diffuse."²⁹

Other indicators also show improved outcomes for Black students in Florida.

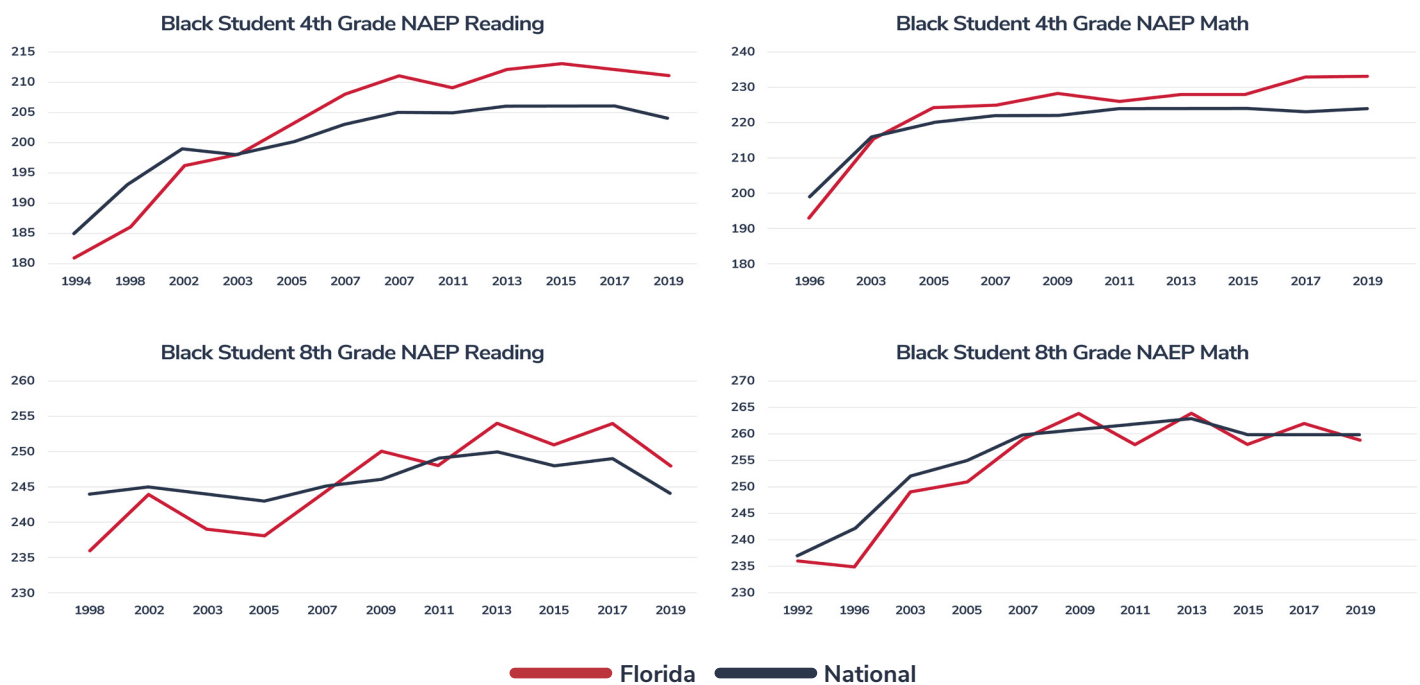
28. [The Effects of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program on College Enrollment and Graduation | Urban Institute](#)

29. [Effects of Scaling Up Private School Choice Programs on Public School Students | NBER](#)

In the mid- to late-1990s, before choice in Florida began its push into the mainstream, the percentage of Black students in Florida scoring at proficient or above was in the single digits on all four reading and math tests that make up the core of the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Black students in Florida lagged Black students in nearly every other state on all four tests. A quarter century later, that situation is nearly reversed.³⁰ (See Figure 5.)

In eighth-grade math, Black students in Florida have moved to the middle of the pack relative to Black students in other states. In fourth grade reading, fourth grade math and eighth grade reading, meanwhile, Black students in Florida now score far above the national average for Black students. In fact, according to the most recent NAEP results in 2019, Black students in Florida now rank No. 1 in fourth grade math, No. 3 in fourth grade reading and No. 6 in eighth grade reading.

Figure 5. Black Student Performance on NAEP in Florida and Nationwide



Source: NAEP Data Explorer (using average scale scores).

These gains, however, must be tempered by the fact of continued low proficiency. Black fourth graders in Florida may have catapulted to No. 1 in math among Black students across America, but only 28 percent are proficient, compared to 59 percent of white fourth graders in Florida. In fourth grade reading – where Black students in Florida are No. 3 in the country – the corresponding rates are 23 percent for Black students and 46 percent for white students.

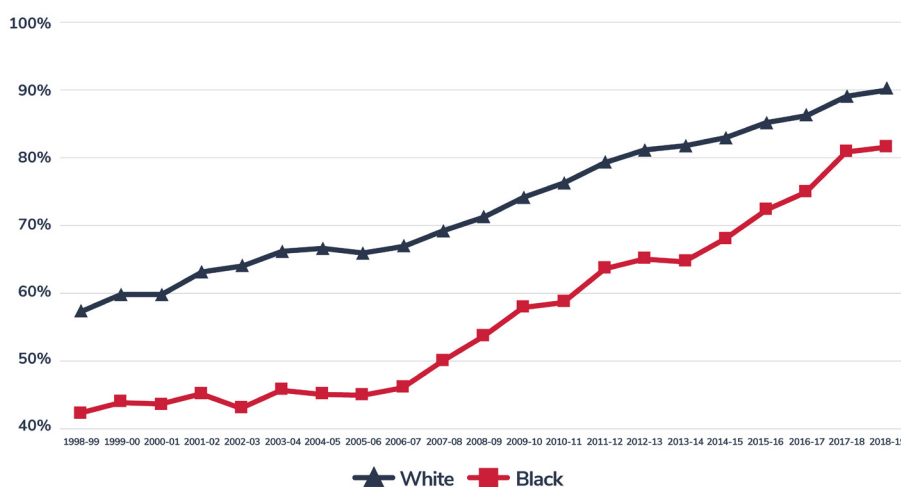
30. [NDE Core Web \(nationsreportcard.gov\)](https://nationsreportcard.gov)

Graduation rates in Florida show stronger progress. In the late 1990s, just as Florida parents began choosing charter schools and using choice scholarships, Florida's public school graduation rate was among the worst in America. In 1999, it was 52 percent.³¹

In 2019, it was 86.9 percent.³²

Over that same span, the graduation rate for Florida's Black students nearly doubled, rising from 42 percent to 81.5 percent.³³ (See Figure 6.) Meanwhile, the gap in graduation rates between Black and white students narrowed from 15 percentage points to 8.7 percentage points.³⁴

Figure 6. Graduation Rates for Black and White Students in Florida



Source: Florida Department of Education.

This progress, it should be noted, occurred in a state with among the highest rates of low-income students in America,³⁵ and among the lowest per-pupil spending.³⁶

31. [Florida's Graduation Rate, 1998-99 to 2017-18 \(fldoe.org\)](#)

32. Florida's graduation rate rose to 90 percent in 2020 but may have been impacted by a one-year suspension of the exit exam requirement due to Covid. [Florida High School Graduation Rates, 2019-20 \(fldoe.org\)](#)

33. The graduation rate for Black students was 86.6 percent in 2020 but again, it may have been impacted by a one-year suspension of the exit exam requirement.

34. The graduation rate gap between Black and white students in Florida in 2020 was 5.1 percentage points.

35. [Number and percentage of public school students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, by state: Selected years, 2000-01 through 2016-17](#)

36. [Current expenditure per pupil in fall enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by state or jurisdiction: Selected years, 1969-70 through 2016-17](#)

Discussion

If controlling the narrative in public education means parents having the power to control the educational destinies of their children, then Black parents in Florida are controlling the narrative like never before. Thanks to the proliferation of school choice and education choice over the past 25 years, they now have real power to choose from a more dynamic array of learning options than Black parents – and parents, period – anywhere in America.

The evidence to date shows no downside.

Black parents welcome the options. Black students benefit from them. The competition engendered by choice is spurring improvements to the system overall.

The lessons from Florida suggest policy makers in other states who want to uplift Black students should relinquish an education delivery system where options are controlled by a single provider and instead let a thousand flowers bloom. In Florida, at least, there is little to stop the next Mary McLeod Bethune – or the next 1,000 – from creating learning environments that are in line with their visions and values.

Little, that is, except the power of Black parents to choose them, or not.

Appendix A: Black Students in Florida Charter Schools

Charter schools are the top non-district option for Black students in Florida.

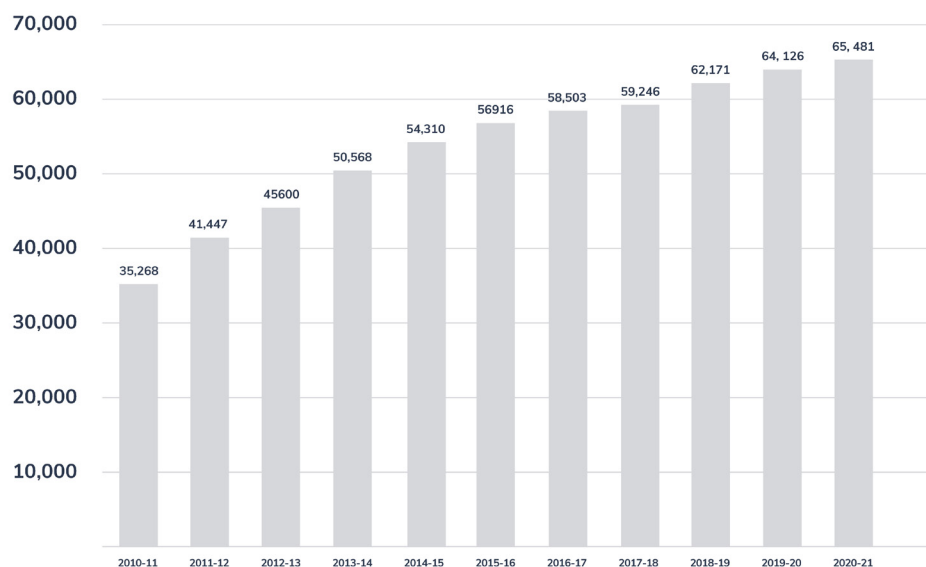
They enrolled 65,481 Black students in the 2020-21 school year, up 86 percent over the past 10 years. (See Figure 7.)

Florida ranks No. 4 among states in the number of Black students enrolled in charter schools, according to the most recent data from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.³⁷ The Sunshine State now has nearly 700 charter schools.³⁸

The pre-eminence of charter schools with Black parents in Florida may stem in part from the fact that charter schools were established in Florida in 1996, years before Florida's private school choice options began to grow. Also, Florida charter schools have not been constrained by the funding, enrollment and eligibility limitations that have curbed the rise of Florida's private school choice programs and, more recently, its education savings account program.

By law, Florida charter schools must be operated by non-profit entities. Until this year, only Florida school districts could authorize them. In 2021, state policymakers added state colleges and universities to the authorizer mix,³⁹ which could open the door for even more diversity and innovation.

Figure 7. Black Students Enrolled in Florida Charter Schools



Source: Florida Department of Education.

37. [Student Race/ Ethnicity Demographics by State and School Type, 2018-19 - National Alliance for Public Charter Schools](#)

38. [Charter-Sept-2020 \(fldoe.org\)](#)

39. [Senate Bill 1028 \(2021\) - The Florida Senate \(flsenate.gov\)](#)

Spotlight: Somerset Academy Eagle Campus

Jacksonville, Fla. has more than 100 private schools that accept school choice scholarships and nearly 40 charter schools, including a growing number in both sectors with well-earned reputations for ably serving students of color. One of those schools is highly rated Somerset Academy Eagle Campus, a 10-year-old charter school that Black parents describe as rigorous and responsive. Principal Tunji Williams, a 27-year educator who has led both charter and district schools, said one key to Somerset's success is a teaching corps that mirrors the student body. While 96 percent of the students are Black, nearly 70 percent of the teachers and administrators are Black. Those connections, Williams said, help create a climate of trust and achievement. Read more about Somerset [here](#).



“I’ve had parents in our community tell me, ‘I went to the website and I saw you and I knew I wanted my kid here.’ Culturally, African-Americans tend to look for someone who looks like them to relate. They feel that person and that staff will understand them and their child. Seeing themselves in the front office and in the classroom helps. The parents know they can be themselves.”

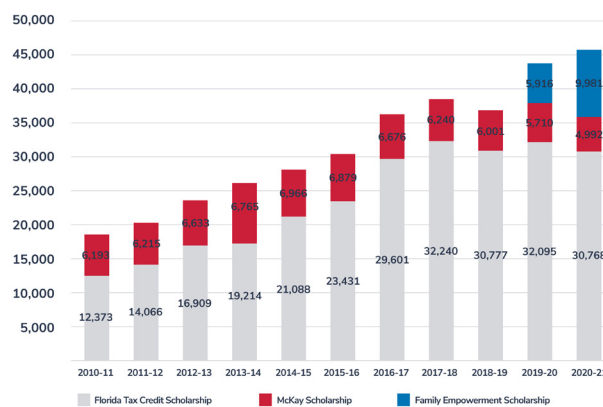
– Tunji Williams, Principal, Somerset Academy

Appendix B: Black Students Using Florida Private School Choice Scholarships

The number of Black students in Florida accessing private schools via choice scholarships is rising rapidly.

In 2010-11, those programs served 18,566 students. In 2020-21, they served 45,741 students. (See Figure 8.) As noted earlier, those numbers do not fully reflect the extent of demand, given limits on funding, enrollment and eligibility.

Figure 8. Black Student Enrollment in Florida Private School Choice Programs



Source: Florida Department of Education.

The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship

To date, Florida's largest private school choice program has been the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship. Created in 2001, the scholarship is funded by corporations that get dollar-for-dollar tax credits in return for contributions. Historically, its primary beneficiaries have been students of color from working-class families. The average annual family income for a scholarship student is currently about \$40,000.

In 2010, a strong, bipartisan majority of the Florida Legislature, including two-thirds of the Legislative Black Caucus, voted to allow fundraising caps for the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship to grow by 25 percent a year. The accelerated growth that followed quickly made the program the nation's largest for private school choice. It is also notable that, to date, nine separate fiscal analyses by independent groups and agencies have concluded the program saves taxpayer money – and none have concluded otherwise.⁴⁰

The Family Empowerment Scholarship

Florida created the Family Empowerment Scholarship in 2019 so more working-class and middle-income families could benefit from private school choice, this time through a means-tested scholarship that receives direct state funding.

40. [21.12.1-FTC-Cost-Savings.pdf \(stepupforstudents.org\)](#)

In 2021, the Florida Legislature made a number of changes to the program. It revised scholarship eligibility so it encompassed two separate categories – one for lower- and middle-income families; the other for students with special needs. It streamlined the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship and means-tested Family Empowerment Scholarship so they would have the same income eligibility thresholds and scholarship amounts. It also added flexibility to the annual growth cap for the Family Empowerment Scholarship, so enrollment potentially could expand beyond the initial cap of roughly 28,000 students each year.

Families with household incomes up to 375 percent of the federal poverty line are now eligible for the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship and means-tested Family Empowerment Scholarship. However, families earning 185 percent of the poverty line or less – the threshold for free-and reduced-price lunch – are given priority. The average value for both the FTC and FES means-tested scholarship is about \$7,300 a year.

The McKay Scholarship

Florida’s third major private school choice program is the McKay Scholarship for students with disabilities. It was established as a pilot in 1999 and expanded statewide in 2001. In 2022, it will be converted into an education savings account and merged with the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Unique Abilities.

Spotlight: Icon Preparatory School

Dwayne Raiford envisioned his “HBCU inspired,” college-prep private school in Tampa enrolling 60 students the first year. But as it turned out, hundreds of parents in Tampa’s most underserved neighborhoods applied to [Icon Preparatory School](#) right off the bat. Now the K-8 school is rolling through its fourth year with 400 students using school choice scholarships, 60 more on a waiting list, and plans to replicate in another city next year. A veteran educator who specialized in school turnarounds, Raiford determined the flexibility of a private school offered the best route to student success. His leadership team, many of them Florida A&M University alum like himself, has a combined 70 years of experience in public schools. Read more about “The Home of the Rattlers” [here](#).



“I was the first in my family to earn a college degree, and the first male on my father’s side to graduate from high school. When I got to college, I didn’t realize I had to buy my own books for class. I want to make sure our students not just get to college, but are prepared for college. This isn’t a job for me and my staff. This is personal.”

– Dwayne Raiford, Superintendent, Icon Preparatory

Appendix C: Black Students Using Florida Education Savings Accounts

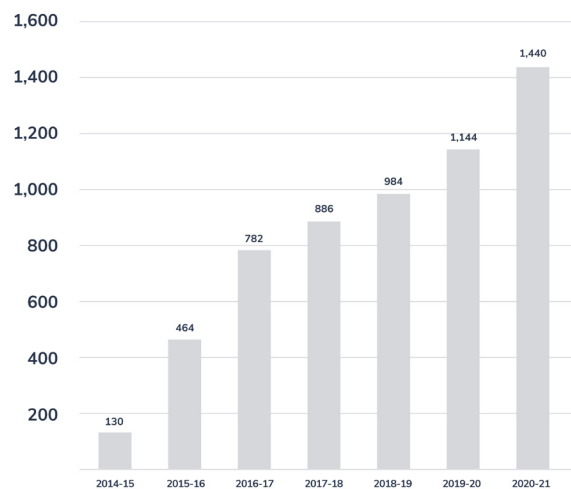
The number of Black students in Florida using education savings accounts is also rising rapidly.

Education savings accounts, or ESAs for short, are vehicles for education choice that give parents the flexibility to customize a learning regimen for their child. Unlike a traditional school choice scholarship, an ESA isn't limited to private school tuition. It can be used to pay for a wide range of state-approved programs and services, including tuition, tutoring, therapies, digital devices, curriculum and more.

The Florida education savings account for students with special needs, created in 2014, is the nation's largest. Now called the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Unique Abilities, it served more than 17,000 families in 2020-21 and will serve more than 21,000 students in 2021-22. The number of Black students using ESAs in Florida rose from 130 in 2014-15 to 1,440 last year. (See Figure 9.)

In 2022-23, Florida's McKay Scholarship for students with disabilities will be folded into the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Unique Abilities. In 2020-21, the McKay program served 28,065 students, including 4,992 Black students.

Figure 9. Black Students in Florida Using Education Savings Accounts



Source: Step Up For Students.

Spotlight: Khaliah Clanton-Williams

Khaliah Clanton-Williams is an education choice pioneer twice over. In 1999, her mother, Tracy James, secured a Florida Opportunity Scholarship, making Khaliah one of the first students to use what was then the first, modern, statewide school choice scholarship in America. (Their story [here](#).) Now Khaliah is using the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Unique Abilities to create a home education regimen for her son, Kyrian, who is on the autism spectrum. With the scholarship, Khaliah has been able to purchase core academic classes through Florida Virtual School, home education curricula, and a variety of therapies. This customized program for Kyrian was not available in a public or private school, Khaliah said, and she and her husband would not have been able to afford it without the scholarship.



“A lot of people are deciding things need to change in education. When you’re talking about education for minority students, and then education for minority students with special needs, it really complicates things. My grandmother used to say the best place for a child to learn is home, and she was right. With an education savings account, we have the ability to line up the programs and services we know are best for our son.”

– Khaliah Clanton-Williams

Appendix D: Empowering Black Educators in Florida

As options have expanded for Black families in Florida, so too have opportunities for Black educators.

Thousands of Black educators in Florida are today teaching in non-district options that did not exist 10 or 20 years ago. Anecdotal evidence suggests a growing number of Black educators are founding and/or leading schools of choice, too. In that single state senate district in Jacksonville mentioned earlier, the 26 Black-owned private schools are serving more than 2,300 students this fall using the state's two main school choice scholarships.

In 2020-21, state data shows total instructional staff in Florida charter schools stood at 18,236, up 31 percent from six years prior. The data shows 2,488 instructional staffers were Black.⁴¹

A similar racial breakdown is not available for staff in Florida private schools. But fueled by private school choice programs that predominantly serve families of color, that sector is also growing. In 2020-21, total instructional and administrative staff in Florida private schools stood at 43,553,⁴² up 28 percent from a decade prior.⁴³

The impact of Florida choice programs on teacher empowerment deserves a separate spotlight. It is easy to find examples of Florida educators who have been able to start and/or lead their own schools of choice, many after having taught in district schools. Black educators are clearly among them, as the growing list at the Black-Owned Schools Directory, compiled by Black Minds Matter, shows.⁴⁴

Dr. Angela Kennedy founded Deeper Root Academy in Orlando after 14 years teaching in district schools. She wanted a model that would ensure low-income, Black students did not continue to fall through the cracks. In South Florida, Alton Bolden, a former district school administrator and the son of district administrators, decided in 2013 to lead Piney Grove Academy. He wanted Black males in particular to get the support they needed, and a school model with the flexibility to ensure they did.

On a related note, the expansion of choice in Florida is strengthening centuries-old bonds between private schools and Black churches. Thanks to choice scholarships, scores of them are expanding, while new ones are sprouting.

In St. Petersburg, Pastor Robert Ward started Mt. Moriah Christian Fundamental School in 2011 to give Black parents another option in a district with particularly poor outcomes for Black students. Black parents in Florida are more optimistic about their children's education, he said, because they can now access options they were long denied:

"They light up, because they say, 'Oh, here's a place of hope. And I have the power to choose it.'"⁴⁵

41. [Ranks of Florida charter school teachers keep growing - reimaginED \(reimaginedonline.org\)](#)

42. [PS-AnnualReport2021 \(fldoe.org\)](#)

43. [AnnualReportCover \(fldoe.org\)](#)

44. [Home - Black Minds Matter](#)

45. Interview with Pastor Robert Ward, January 2019. [podcastED: Pastor Robert Ward - Educational choice gives black parents hope - reimaginED \(reimaginedonline.org\)](#)

Spotlight: Iman Alleyne

Iman Alleyne pulled her son out of a public-school kindergarten five years ago to homeschool him and inadvertently shifted into a new career. Now the former public-school teacher leads [Kind Academy](#), an inclusive, nature-based micro-school in South Florida, and teaches a popular Black history class through the online [Outschool](#) platform. When Alleyne told other Black teachers on a Facebook discussion group what she was doing, “They were like, whaaat? Tell us more!” District schools work for many children, Alleyne said, but parents should have the power to direct education funding to other options if they don’t. Doing so, she said, will accelerate the evolution of an education system that is more responsive to the families it serves. Check out a video podcast with Iman Alleyne [here](#).



“Having teachers that look like you is a huge deal for people,” Alleyne said. Black parents want teachers “who will take that curriculum and say, ‘This is your greatness, too. I want you to see your greatness in it.’ I think that’s a big part of it for a lot of Black families. We need educators who are creating schools that are for us, and by us.”

– Iman Alleyne

About the Authors



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About the Organizations



Black Minds Matter

Black Minds Matter is a national movement to celebrate Black minds, support excellence, and promote the development of high-quality school options for Black students.

AMERICAN
FEDERATION *for*
Children



American Federation for Children

The American Federation for Children is a nonprofit advocacy group that seeks to empower families, especially lower-income families, with the freedom to choose the best K-12 education for their children.



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 Reading Scholarship Accounts.