



Alane Academy, Wauchula, FL

 **REROUTING...**

# **the Myths of Rural Education Choice**

Ron Matus | Dava Hankerson

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# Rerouting ... From Myths to Facts About School Choice in Rural Areas *(from a state that actually has school choice in rural areas)*

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## **Highlights**

### ***Education choice is growing in rural Florida.***

- **Rural families like options.** Families in rural Florida, like families everywhere, are choosing learning options other than district schools. In 2021-22, 16.7 percent of students in Florida's 30 rural counties attended something other than a district school, whether a private school, charter school, or home education. That's up from 10.6 percent a decade prior.
- **Rural families like private school choice.** Over the past decade, the number of private school choice scholarships grew in Florida's 30 rural counties. In 2011-12, there were 1,706 income-based choice scholarships in those counties. In 2021-22, there were 6,992.<sup>1</sup>
- **Private schools are being created to meet demand.** The number of private schools in Florida's rural counties has expanded over the past 20 years, from 69 to 120. Even in the most sparsely populated counties, choice is enabling supply to meet demand.
- **Rural families like education savings accounts.** Sixty-five students in Florida's rural counties accessed state-funded education savings accounts when the program for students with special needs began in 2014-15.<sup>2</sup> By 2021-22, that number had grown to 731, and this fall it has more than doubled, to 1,985 and counting.<sup>3</sup>

## **And yet...**

### ***The sky is not falling on rural district schools.***

- **Rural private school growth has been modest.** Over the past decade, private school enrollment share in Florida's rural counties rose from 4.5 to 6.9 percent. That's it. At the same time, total enrollment in rural district schools grew by 3.3 percent.
- **Rural district schools are still tops by a mile.** Florida's income-based choice scholarships are available to more than 70 percent of families. Yet the overwhelming majority of rural families – 83 percent – still choose district schools.

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1. The 2021-22 statistics for both the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Educational Options (a traditional school choice scholarship) and the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Unique Abilities (an education savings account) do not include a small number of scholarships that were administered by another scholarship funding organization.

2. Same as above

3. There were 1,985 FESUA scholarships funded for students in Florida's 30 rural counties as of Nov. 15, 2022. That number continues to tick up slightly as funding becomes available and applications continue to be processed.

## *Introduction*

**It's a myth repeated so often and for so long it's come to be accepted as fact:**

*School choice won't work in rural areas.*

But just like so many other myths about school choice – that it destroys traditional public schools, that it doesn't lead to better academic outcomes, that it lacks accountability – the myth about school choice not working in rural areas doesn't stand up to scrutiny.

*Take a look at Florida.*

Florida's choice programs are among the oldest and most expansive in America. And there's no doubt they've taken root in rural Florida. Highly regarded charter schools can be found from Florida's Forgotten Coast in the Panhandle to the edge of the Everglades. High-quality private schools have sprouted from the Apalachicola National Forest to the heart of Florida cattle country. In scores of small towns, resourceful parents are using state-funded education savings accounts to customize education programming for their children.

*This is the reality.*

There are so many positive testimonials about education choice in rural Florida, in fact, that it's baffling to hear choice opponents in Texas, Oklahoma, Iowa and other states continue to make the same, contradictory claims: 1) that school choice won't do any good for rural areas, because there are so few options to give rural parents a choice, and 2) that it will decimate rural district schools.

To be sure, the definition of "rural" can be fuzzy. Rural Florida isn't the same as say, rural Alaska. For this brief, we rely on a definition for "rural county" that is used by the Florida Department of Health: any county that averages less than 100 people per square mile. We think this definition fairly meets popular conceptions of "rural." It also conveniently lines up with how education data is routinely collected in Florida, where public school district lines correspond with county boundaries.

The 30 counties that meet this definition (see the list in Appendix A) average 47 people per square mile. If those counties were a state, they'd rank No. 38 in population density, between Colorado and Maine. It's important to note there are myriad coastal counties in Florida that are not defined as rural but have vast stretches of interior heartland. Choice schools in those areas – say, in Immokalee in eastern Collier County, or in Indiantown in western Martin County – would not be counted in our analysis.

**Broadly speaking, the data show two things are true at once:**

- 1) *The expansion of private school choice and education savings accounts (ESAs) in rural Florida has given thousands of parents the power to access learning options that did not exist a generation ago.*
- 2) *As a whole, that expansion has not put much of a dent in traditional public school enrollment.*

The result is a more pluralistic public education system that isn't "killing" rural communities, [as one prominent choice opponent claimed](#). It's strengthening them.

Nothing tears up a community more than failing students and frayed families. The expansion of choice in Florida has put more students on the path to success, not only in choice schools but in traditional public schools. It has been [the tide that lifts all boats](#).

In rural areas, expanding choice has had the added benefit of saving some families with struggling children from having to make a heartbreaking decision: Leave the communities they love to access better learning options elsewhere. Or stay rooted and watch their kids fail.

Choice has given them the best of both worlds.

In Wauchula, Fla. (population 4,900), Ashley "Logan" Harned's son Bass struggled with reading in his neighborhood school. By second grade, he stopped wanting to go.

Desperate, Harned secured a choice scholarship and enrolled Bass in a home-grown private school. Alane Academy was started by a former school district Teacher of the Year with deep roots in this community of cattle ranches and orange groves. Her teachers gave Bass more 1-on-1 attention. They exercised patience. They boosted his confidence. Three months later, Bass was a different child. Now he's reading on grade level and, better yet, reading at home without prodding from mom.

Harned said having an option made all the difference, with stakes that couldn't have been higher.

"This was my kid's life," she said.

All over rural Florida, thousands of parents know exactly what she means.

For more about the reality of school choice in rural Florida, watch this short video [here](#).

## Fact 1. Rural families like options.

Families [like school choice](#). Rural families are no exception.

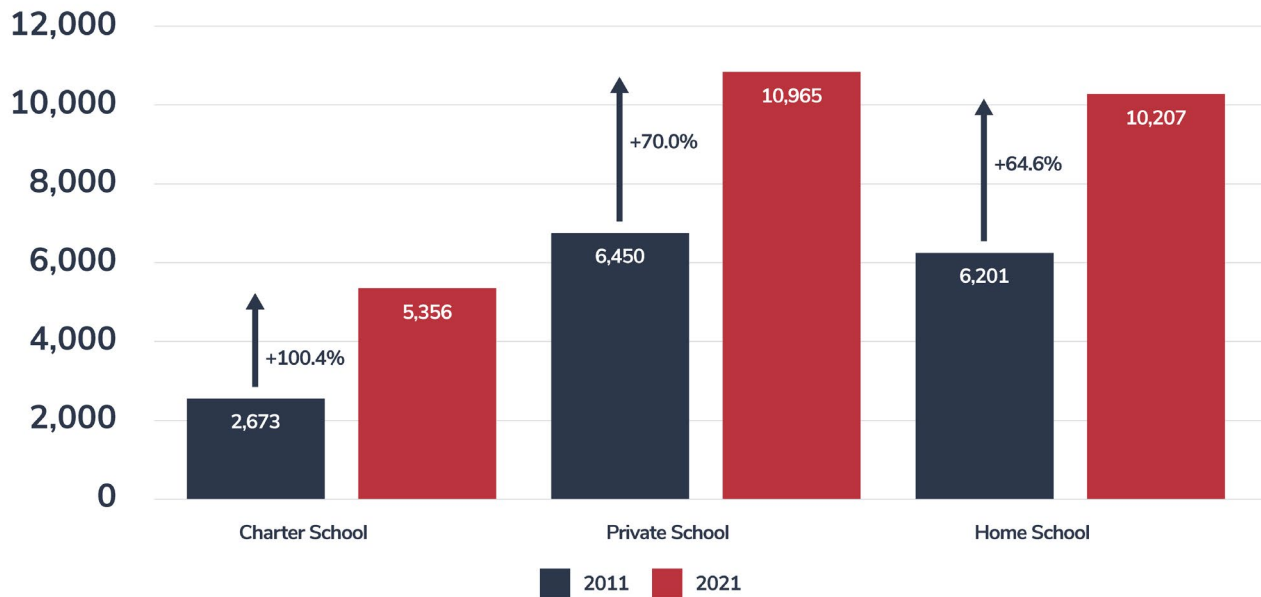
For a quarter century, Florida has been a national trailblazer in expanding choice. Even with creation of a universal ESA in Arizona in 2022 and a near-universal ESA in West Virginia in 2021, Florida remains a leader in the number and diversity of learning options.

That includes the nation's biggest private school choice programs; one of its biggest charter school sectors; and (for now) its biggest ESA program.

Between 2011-12 and 2021-22, the percentage of Florida students enrolled in a non-district school – whether private school, charter school, or home education – rose from 18.6 percent to 27.3 percent.

In Florida's 30 rural counties, the percentage grew from 10.6 percent to 16.7 percent. (See Figure 1)

**Figure 1. Non-district enrollment growth in rural Florida**



## Fact 2. Rural families like private school choice.

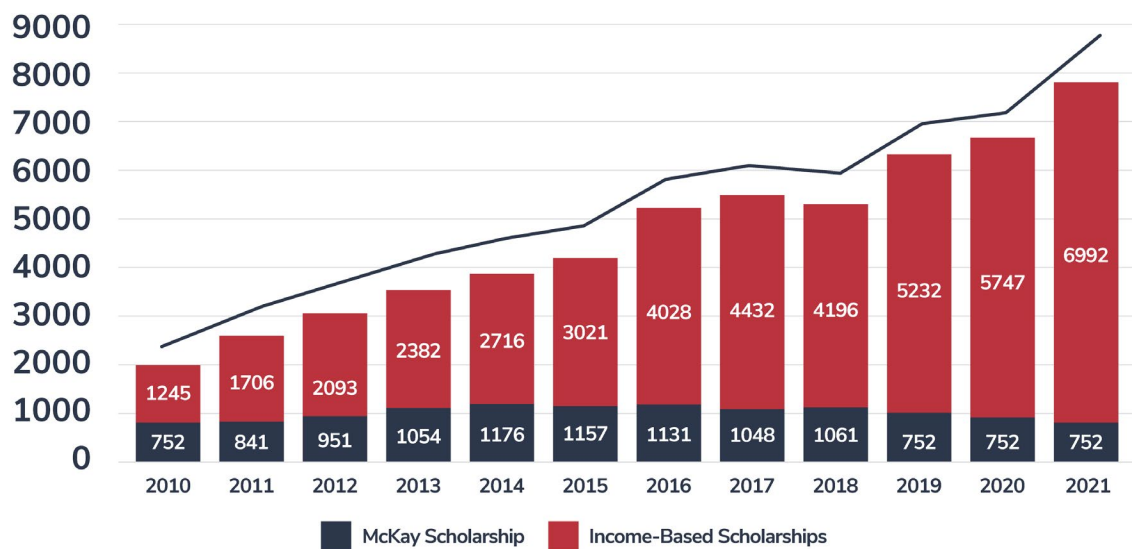
Over the past decade, the number of private school choice scholarships has grown in Florida's 30 rural counties, particularly with income-based scholarships. (See Figure 2)

Until this year, Florida had three major, traditional private school choice programs:

- The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, a means-tested scholarship funded by corporate contributions in return for dollar-for-dollar tax credits.
- The Family Empowerment Scholarship for Educational Options, also means-tested but state funded.
- The McKay Scholarship for students with disabilities. It, too, was funded by the state but was converted this year into an ESA and merged with the existing ESA, the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Unique Abilities.

Statewide, more than 70 percent of families are eligible for Florida's income-based scholarships, yet only 12.2 percent of Florida students are enrolled in private schools. (In rural counties it's 6.9 percent). The average annual family income for students on scholarship is \$37,731.

Figure 2. Private school choice enrollment in rural Florida



### ***Fact 3. Private schools are being created to meet demand.***

Those who oppose private school choice in states without such programs often say choice won't work in rural areas because there aren't many – or any – nearby private schools.

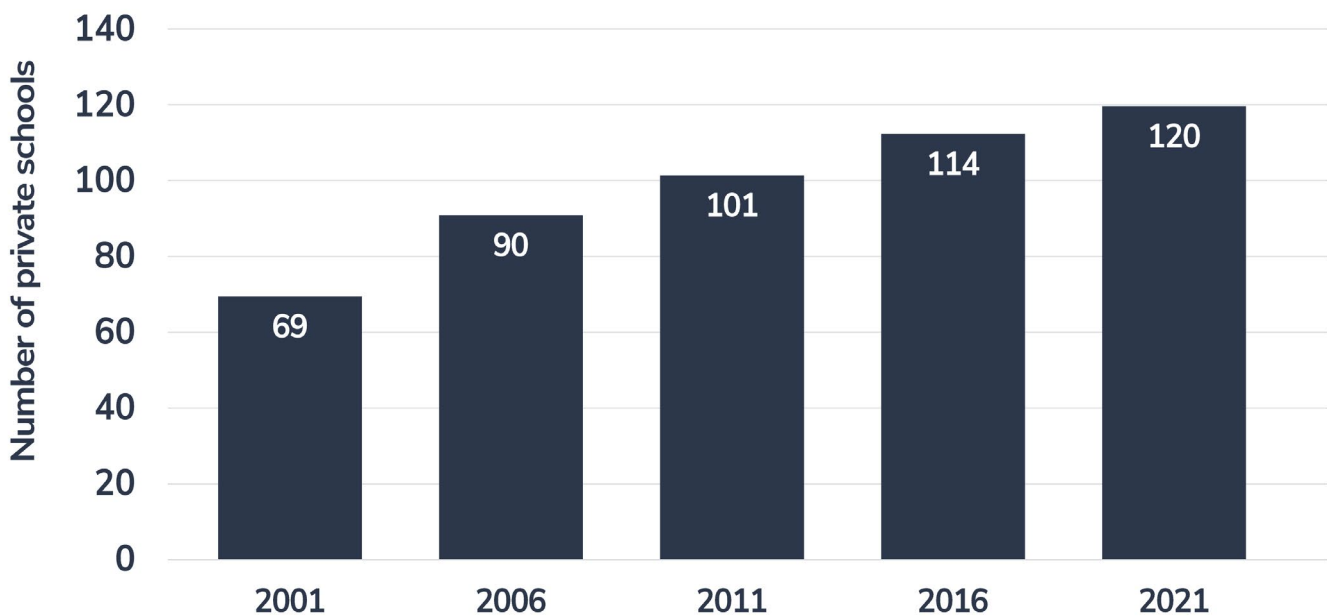
It's true there are fewer private schools in rural areas, just like there are fewer public schools in rural areas. But there are thousands of private schools in rural America.

A [2017 report from Brookings](#) found 69 percent of rural families live within 10 miles of a private school – which is higher than the percentage of rural families who live within 10 miles of a charter school (17 percent) or another district school accessible via intradistrict choice (60 percent).

With choice, supply also grows to meet demand – even in rural areas. (See Figure 3)

For a sampling of newer, choice-driven private schools in rural Florida, see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

**Figure 3. Private school growth in rural Florida**





## ***Fact 4. Rural families like education savings accounts.***

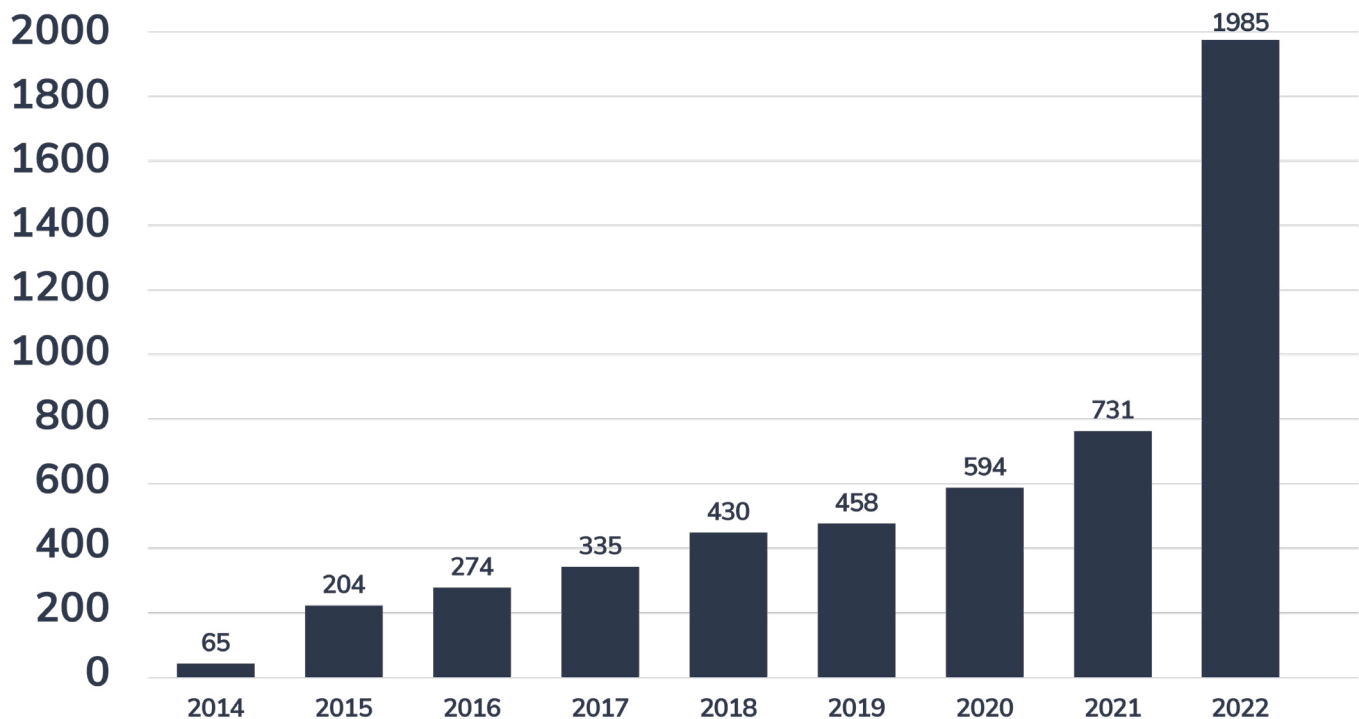
Florida created an ESA for students with special needs in 2014. It's now the largest ESA program in America, serving more than 65,000 students this fall.

In Florida's rural counties, the number of students using ESAs has grown from 65 in year one, to 731 last year, to 1,985 and counting this fall. Most of the growth this fall is coming because the state's traditional choice scholarship for students with disabilities was converted into an ESA. (See Figure 4)

ESAs are more flexible than traditional choice scholarships. They can be used not only for tuition, but therapies, tutoring, digital technology and a wide range of other state-approved uses.

Parents all over Florida are using ESAs to customize education for their children. But [research has found](#) rural ESA parents are especially resourceful. For one example, click [here](#).

**Figure 4. ESA program enrollment in rural Florida**



## Fact 5. The sky is not falling.

The expansion of private school choice and ESAs has helped thousands of rural Florida families access options that are a better fit for their children. That's a lot of lives changed for the better.

At the same time, for the vast majority of rural school districts, the enrollment shifts have been modest.

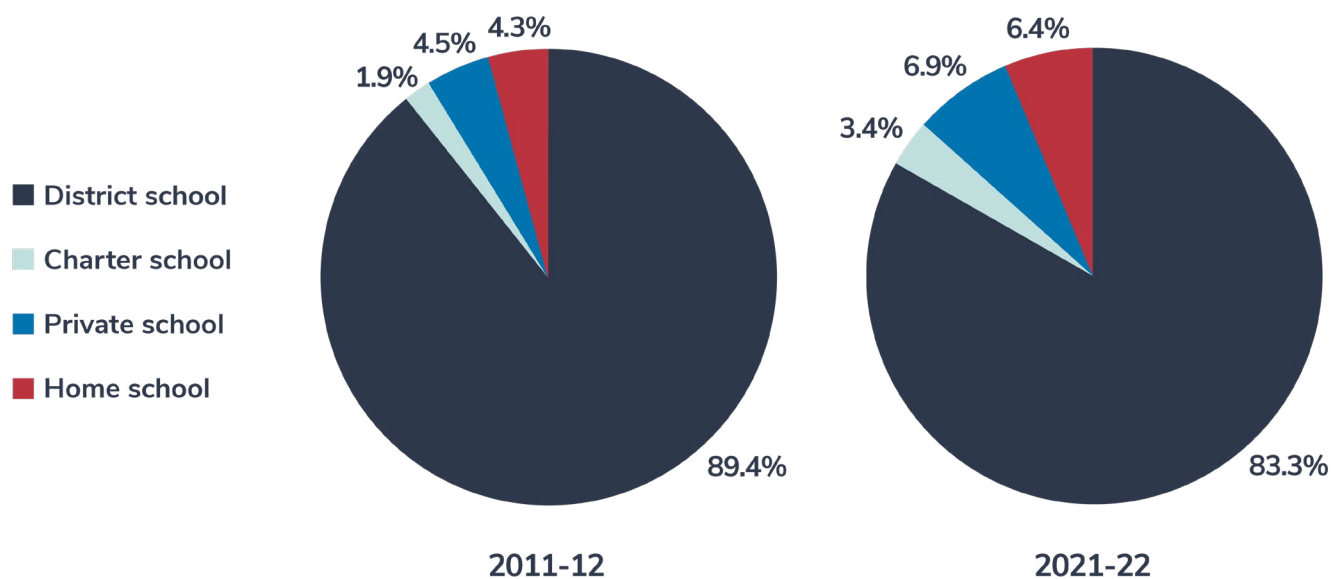
Over the past decade, private school enrollment share in those districts rose from 4.5 to 6.9 percent. That's it, despite the most far-reaching school choice expansion in America. (See Figure 5)

Florida's income-based choice scholarships are worth about \$7,700 each; more than 70 percent of families can access them. Yet rural families are not rushing for the exits.

### The bottom line:

School choice doesn't make the sky fall on rural district schools. But it does help part the clouds for rural families who need options for their children.

Figure 5. Enrollment share in Florida's rural counties



# Appendix

## Florida's 30 Rural Counties

County	Total population	People per square mile	Total enrollment (public, private, home) 2021-22
Baker	28,259	48.3	5,534
Bradford	28,303	96.3	3,808
Calhoun	13,648	24.1	2,251
Columbia	69,698	87.4	11,975
DeSoto	33,976	53.4	5,187
Dixie	16,759	23.8	2,427
Franklin	12,451	22.8	1,358
Gadsden	43,826	84.9	5,810
Gilchrist	17,864	51.1	3,491
Glades	12,126	15.0	1,903
Gulf	14,192	25.6	2,258
Hamilton	14,004	27.2	1,995
Hardee	25,327	39.7	5,300
Hendry	39,619	34.3	15,047
Highlands	101,235	99.5	14,267
Holmes	19,653	41.0	3,458
Jackson	47,319	51.5	6,791
Jefferson	14,510	24.3	1,331
Lafayette	8,226	15.1	1,361
Levy	42,915	38.4	6,395
Liberty	7,974	9.5	1,413
Madison	17,968	25.8	2,698
Monroe	82,874	84.3	9,609
Okeechobee	39,644	51.5	7,320
Suwannee	43,474	63.1	7,296
Taylor	21,796	20.9	3,591
Union	16,147	66.3	2,645
Wakulla	33,764	55.7	5,656
Walton	75,305	72.5	13,147
Washington	25,318	43.3	3,971

Sources: 2020 U.S. Census, Florida Department of Education

## ***About the authors***



### ***Ron Matus***

Ron Matus is director, policy and public affairs, at Step Up For Students and a former newspaper reporter.



### ***Dava Hankerson***

Dava Hankerson is director, enterprise data and research, at Step Up For Students and a former public school teacher.

## ***About Step Up For Students***



Step Up For Students is a nonprofit that administers four education choice programs in Florida that serve nearly 250,000 students: The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, the Family Empowerment Scholarship, the Hope Scholarship and the New Worlds Reading Scholarship Accounts.