



A TASTE OF
**À LA CARTE
LEARNING**



**HOW EDUCATION ENTREPRENEURS, CUSTOMIZING
PARENTS & ESAS ARE COOKING UP A LIMITLESS
MENU OF LEARNING OPTIONS**

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STARTERS

Education choice is about more than schools. The rise of à la carte learning in South Florida foreshadows the transition from school choice to education choice as more families across America access state-supported education savings accounts (ESAs) and other flexible spending vehicles.



TAKEAWAYS

À LA CARTE PROVIDERS ARE KEY BUILDING BLOCKS

They're small, flexible, diverse, stackable, and usually focused on single subjects. They fill gaps left by traditional providers, enhance the work of newer options like micro-schools, and stretch the definition of public education.

FAMILIES BENEFIT

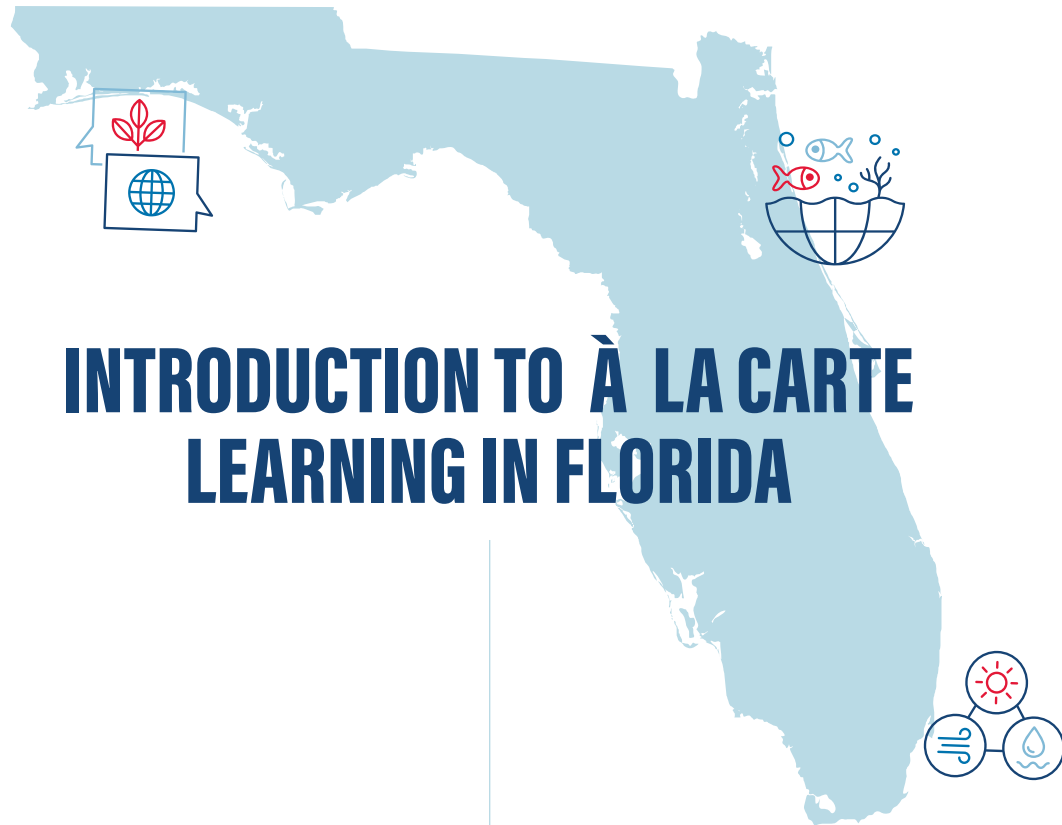
As à la carte providers expand in tandem with ESAs, more families can assemble exactly what they want for their children, mixing and matching from an ever-growing variety of learning programs, services, and providers.

EDUCATORS BENEFIT

Education entrepreneurs, including former public teachers, can continue leveraging ESAs to start their own schools. As more parents access ESAs, creating narrowly focused à la carte options will become increasingly viable.

CHALLENGES REMAIN

To ensure the sustained growth of à la carte providers, policy-makers must continue working with parents, providers, and other stakeholders to raise awareness about the possibilities, better define success and accountability, and thoughtfully strengthen processes for everything from determining eligibility to facilitating payments.



INTRODUCTION TO À LA CARTE LEARNING IN FLORIDA

Broward County is a cramped patch of palmy, South Florida sprawl, with 2 million people stuffed between the swamp (the Everglades) and the sea (the Atlantic). It's home to the sixth-biggest school district in America, a goliath stacked between two other behemoths.¹ Nothing in this semi-tropical megalopolis looks like the frontier. But in the shadow of giants, education pioneers, freed by state policy and state funding, are blazing trails to something new and nimble—and more fun to boot.

With universal, state-supported education savings accounts (ESAs) taking root in Florida, Arizona, and a growing handful of other states,² the transition from school choice to education choice is beginning to accelerate. In Florida, the steady expansion of school choice spurred a net gain of 854 new private schools and charter schools over the past decade alone.³ That trend toward more and better schools will continue. And now, as ESAs expand, whole new species of little learning options are beginning to emerge.

SOUTH FLORIDA IS THE BEST PLACE IN AMERICA TO GLIMPSE THE FUTURE

Not only is South Florida—and Broward in particular—a nationally recognized hot spot for micro-schools,⁴ but it's also alive with a small but growing number of eclectic enrichment providers, single-subject operators, and tutors with a twist.

Nobody has a handle on exact numbers, and nobody has put together a directory yet. But at least a couple dozen of these providers are already serving thousands of students.

Their contribution to the choice menu is à la carte.

Some of these à la carte providers are tied into South Florida's micro-school network, essentially acting as subcontractors to provide lessons in a variety of subjects, be it core academics or cooking, coding, and composting. Others serve mostly home-schoolers. Many do both.

ALL, HOWEVER, STAND TO GAIN FROM THE FAST-GROWING NUMBERS OF PARENTS WHO NOW, WITH ESAS, HAVE THE POWER TO UNBUNDLE EDUCATION FUNDING, SELECT FROM AN EVER-GROWING VARIETY OF PRODUCTS AND PROVIDERS, AND PIECE TOGETHER EXACTLY THE PROGRAMMING THEY WANT FOR THEIR CHILDREN.

It's like a twist on that old Burger King slogan: *Have it your way.* Except the menu isn't confined to the educational equivalent of fast food.

IT'S LIMITLESS.

The à la carte operators and other innovative educators in South Florida are starting to generate their own well-deserved buzz.⁴

At the same time, they're complementing a rich swirl of other à la carte offerings, some old, some new, and some in a whole different light, thanks to the game-changing flexibility of ESAs.

[Florida Virtual School](#) has been offering "course choice" for a quarter century. Home-school co-ops have been doing the same for decades; tutors, for millennia. Today, parents with ESAs can choose from any of these options. They can also tuck on individual classes from public or private schools, tap lively online platforms like [Outschool](#), or add other education-related offerings like chess clubs, robotics teams, or [Tinkergarten](#). Like apps for your phone, the combinations are endless. Now there's even a platform, [MatchED](#), that can help families sort through the possibilities.

STUDENTS, FAMILIES, TEACHERS, AND SCHOOLS ARE ALREADY SEEING THE UPSIDE

In Florida, thousands of ESA parents of students with special needs have been quietly trailblazing à la carte learning for a decade and showing other parents what's doable.

Educators are benefiting, too. With ESAs, education entrepreneurs can more easily create any number of options that sync with their visions of teaching and learning. They can create a whole package of a school if they want; in South Florida, scores of micro-schools serve as models and inspirations. But if they'd rather focus on a more granular offering, the early evidence suggests that route is viable, too.

The contrast between these new providers and their traditional counterparts is stark. A recent Pew Research survey of 2,500 public school teachers nationwide found 68 percent said their job was overwhelming, and only 20 percent expected public education to be better in five years.⁵ In South Florida, meanwhile, the joy of parents and providers who are shaping their own educational destinies is palpable.

This white paper aims to give a national audience a taste of the à la carte options emerging in South Florida, touch on factors feeding its growth, and offer a few suggestions to further fuel it.



THERE'S NO REASON WHY PARENTS, EDUCATORS, AND COMMUNITIES ACROSS AMERICA CAN'T COOK UP THEIR OWN VIBRANT SYSTEMS, WITH THEIR OWN DISTINCTIVE TOUCHES, TO CATER TO THEIR OWN DISTINCTIVE VISIONS. À LA CARTE OPTIONS CAN ENHANCE THEIR MENUS FOR LEARNING. WITH EDUCATION FUNDING TRULY FOLLOWING THE CHILD, FAMILIES CAN CHOOSE AS MUCH OR AS LITTLE AS THEY WANT.

Tyler Izuagie, a former public school teacher who founded the [Horizon Learning](#) micro-school in Miramar, 30 minutes north of Miami, leans on a handful of à la carte providers to offer her students deeper dives into the subjects they and their families want to pursue. For marine science, they turn to Saltwater Studies, one of the providers featured in this report. "I loved how she ignited my students' passion in marine life," Izuagie said of Saltwater Studies founder Christa Jewett. "She's able to reach the students in a way that I'm not able to." The same goes for the other providers Horizon contracts with, who separately teach African dance, African drums, coding, and robotics.



Shiren Rattigan, the founder of [Colossal Academy](#) in Fort Lauderdale (and also a former public school teacher), also contracts with multiple à la carte providers. In some cases, the entities only now realize that what they're doing fits under the broader, bottom-up definition of public education being ushered in by ESAs. For example, Colossal students are building a garden under the guidance of a small company that sets up residential composting systems. That company is now developing a learning program specifically for students and gearing up to become a provider that parents can access via ESAs.

A-HA MOMENTS LIKE THIS ARE FLICKERING ON ALL OVER SOUTH FLORIDA. SAID RATTIGAN, "WE'RE REALLY ACTIVATING THE ENTREPRENEUR SIDE OF WHAT'S POSSIBLE."

TODAY'S SPECIALS



WHAT'S ON THE MENU?

TODAY'S SPECIALS

SALTWATER STUDIES

Making the Atlantic Ocean into a classroom.

PROJECT FLOURISH

Teaching cooking the hands-on way.

SURF SKATE SCIENCE

Science education — at the skate park.

EYE OF A SCIENTIST

Experiencing science education firsthand.

THE LIVING SCHOOL

Taking school on the road.



Saltwater Studies founder Christa Jewett said when it comes to the potential for education entrepreneurs to create à la carte options in Florida's choice-driven environment, "The sky's the limit."

SALTWATER STUDIES

SO HOW'S THIS FOR A SCIENCE CLASSROOM?

These students are snorkeling on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean in a place called Jupiter Inlet. They're enrolled in an à la carte learning program called Saltwater Studies.

Saltwater Studies was started in 2011 by Christa Jewett, a marine biologist who used to work for an environmental consulting firm. Now she teaches students from kindergarten to high school in South Florida's expanding network of home-schools and micro-schools.

More than a dozen state and county parks function as their classrooms. At one, Jewett secured a state permit so her students could contribute data to a marine life monitoring project.

This is what "school" can look like in a world where entrepreneurs can leverage education choice programs to create innovative options and parents can use those programs to access them.

Until a few years ago, Jewett had to work side jobs because her immersive science lessons alone wouldn't pay the bills. Then COVID-19 happened. Suddenly, more parents, dissatisfied with traditional schools for multiple reasons, wanted more options.

Now Jewett's serving 200 students a month. That's triple the number from 2020 and 20 times the number she started with in 2011.

"It's gotten so big so fast, it's surreal," Jewett said.

Last school year, about 15 students used ESAs to access Saltwater Studies. This year, the number is 32 and counting. Now that Florida has universal eligibility for ESAs, even more students and families will be able to access what Jewett and other entrepreneurs are creating.

"Christa's heart and passion about what she teaches is spot on," said Juliette Mooney, whose sons, Seven, 10, and Levi, 6, secured ESAs this year. "There's nothing she doesn't know about our water."

Mooney said her boys love Saltwater Studies because they learn better outdoors. "They're full-on boys," she said. "When they exercise, they can focus better. We do a lot of learning like this."

On a windy day last fall, Jewett began the day's lessons with eight elementary-school-aged students at picnic tables near the water's edge, beneath cabbage palms and sea grape trees. This was a good spot to see dolphins, rays, and manatees, she told them. But the wind had kicked up turbidity in the water, so visibility wouldn't be as good as usual.

If they were lucky, though, they might still get a treat: a glimpse of two sea creatures in a symbiotic relationship—a little fish called a goby and a nearly blind little crustacean called a snapping shrimp. Jewett explained that the pair share burrows and protect each other from predators.

"They're right here!" Jewett told them, pointing to a line of wake-breaking rocks 100 yards away.

Jewett's instruction was a digestible mix of facts and concepts. Her delivery was infectious. The students couldn't wait to put on their snorkels and see for themselves.

"SO OFTEN IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM, YOU'RE TOLD THIS IS WHAT YOU HAVE TO TEACH. BECAUSE OF THE SIZE OF THE SYSTEM, THEY HAVE TO BE REGIMENTED," JEWETT SAID. "THE BIGGER IT GETS, THE MORE BOUNDARIES THEY HAVE TO PUT IN PLACE."

"But I have flexibility," Jewett continued. "That's what makes this class exciting."

On the Saltwater Studies website, Jewett explains why she switched careers. From the beginning, the goal was to offer a biblical perspective on the wonders of marine environments. Given the demand, Jewett offers classes with a biblical or secular perspective, depending on what parents prefer. The split is about 60/40. Either way, students gain a deeper understanding of the diversity and amazingness of life on Earth.



Christa Jewett, founder of Saltwater Studies

"Saltwater Studies is the coolest thing ever," said Jackie Sickels, whose son, Dash, 11, uses an ESA for students with special needs. "It's a lot more fun way of learning."

Dash was previously enrolled in public school, but distance learning during COVID-19 was "pointless," Sickels said. She and some of her cousins decided to home-school their children together, and it turned out to be a positive experience. They learned about Saltwater Studies at a home-school showcase sponsored by a local church.

Jewett's program turned out to be even better than expected. Dash has learned about everything from manatees to pink moon jellyfish to sea slugs called nudibranchs, all with real-life examples.

Jewett's approach "checks all the boxes: visual, auditory, hands-on," Sickels said.

Karina Scarlett's daughter, Kaylee, 8, has been attending Saltwater Studies for three years. She also uses an ESA for students with special needs.

Jewett is "applying all these science components—measurements and tools and concepts—while they're working hands-on," Scarlett said.

On one outing, Kaylee caught an elusive ghost crab. With Jewett's help, they identified the crab as female, then measured and released it.

Scarlett uses the term "eclectic learning" to describe the home education program she has curated for Kaylee using the ESA. Having the ability to pick and choose exactly what works for her daughter, including providers like Saltwater Studies, is "wonderful," she said.

"It's freedom."

PROJECT FLOURISH

These middle school students at the [Colossal Academy](#) micro-school had a blast making zucchini boats under the guidance of [Alicia Garcia](#), a former chef who now leads a unique educational provider called [Project Flourish](#).

Project Flourish specializes in customized cooking lessons that go beyond cooking. Math, science, culture, trade, agriculture, and everything else related to food are effortlessly weaved in.

"FOOD IS APPLICABLE TO EVERY SUBJECT," GARCIA SAID. "IT'S NOT JUST ENRICHMENT. IT'S CORE. IT'S LIFE-CHANGING."

Garcia did not set out to be an educator.

She has a background in culinary arts and fashion design. But the pieces for what became Project Flourish began to click into place as she moved through a series of roles that involved cooking, teaching, and farming.

At one stop, she was the chef at a private school. At another, she was a home economics teacher. At yet another, her family lived on a farm. There, she made connections with other local farmers and became more engaged with sustainable agriculture.

What began as a part-time enterprise doing cooking lessons became full-time when COVID-19 descended in 2020. Project Flourish was born.



Project Flourish serves students in a variety of settings, from micro-schools to co-ops to community gardens. "We continue to see our needs not being met in traditional school settings," said founder Alicia Garcia. "And we're continuing to just be the change that we want."

"The programming just exploded," Garcia said.

Garcia began working with a growing number of microschoools and co-ops in South Florida, customizing lessons to complement their distinctive approaches to teaching and learning.

At one, she focused on food literacy and food insecurity.

At another, the learning unit was built around cultural studies in different countries, so she designed cooking lessons that meshed.

At yet another, the students were learning about the Lunar New Year in some Asian countries. So Garcia supplemented that topic with a lesson that touched on everything from history to table settings to the symbolism of the colors involved. To top it off, the students made dumplings with bamboo shoots and water chestnuts.

In the meantime, the forward-thinking network of micro-schools and other providers in South Florida that Project Flourish has been a part of began to both grow and become more tight-knit.

"It's been such a loving community of educators," Garcia said. "They've been willing to embrace each other with a spirit of collaboration rather than competition."

Project Flourish now serves more than 500 students each year. About half are in micro-schools, and the rest are affiliated with bookstores, community gardens, centers for after-school care, and other entities.

For the lesson at Colossal Academy, Garcia decided to focus on zucchini to celebrate the end of the summer growing season. (The lesson was in September.) Garcia described to the students, in general terms, what they were going to do.

But she didn't do the cooking. They did.

"The more you skill-build and learn," she told them, "the less I do."

The key to student success, she said, is agency.

Owning the learning leads to deeper learning.



Alicia Garcia, founder of Project Flourish

The kids at Colossal grilled the zucchini to their liking; chose what other veggies to include in the filling; sliced and diced according to their preferences; figured out on their own what ingredients to include in the dressing; determined at each table how to accommodate each other's likes and dislikes; and on and on.

"When it's their creation, they have so much more to share," Garcia said.

And mistakes are not a problem: "Was it too salty? That's OK. We embrace mistakes. We talk about what worked and what didn't. And we know we will work on it next time."

Garcia is an education choice pioneer in more ways than one.

Her family is one of a growing number of “multiple choice” families in choice-rich states like Florida.

All four of her children began their education journeys as home-schoolers, then shifted to traditional public schools, magnet schools, charter schools, and private schools, depending on the best fit. Her oldest, who graduated from high school last year, used a state-funded scholarship for students with unique abilities.

As education choice continues to evolve, more and more parents will maximize the use of ESAs. This will give them the flexibility to choose a private school if that’s what they think is best for their children or to craft a more personalized program using a variety of services and providers.

Those zucchini boats and smiles are a sign of things to come.

SURF SKATE SCIENCE

In 1977, a 15-year-old skateboarder in South Florida named [Alan Gelfand](#) invented a revolutionary move called “the ollie.” The ollie has been called the “[cornerstone of modern skateboarding](#)” because future skateboarders would use it as the building block for so many gravity-defying tricks.

In a similar vein six years ago, Toni and Uli Frallicciardi—who, as fate would have it, live in South Florida and know Gelfand— invented their own distinctive move in the education space.

Their outfit, [Surf Skate Science](#), isn’t a school. It focuses on a single subject area. But it does so in a way that allows its classes to be a building block.

The classes can stand alone or be plugged into South Florida’s network of micro-schools. They can also be mixed and matched with other providers into whatever combination a family may want.

Truth be told, that’s not what the Frallicciardis intended in the beginning.

“We had no idea how this would grow,” Toni Frallicciardi said. “We were just trying to figure out what would work for our kids.”

The Frallicciardis aren’t alone in their creativity or in their ability to seize on serendipity.

What’s rising in South Florida evokes “[The Geography of Genius](#).” In a few short years, scores of educators have created a completely self-sufficient alternative ecosystem, with à la carte providers like Surf Skate Science an increasingly important component. Micro-

school founder Shiren Rattigan, whose Colossal Academy works with a dozen of them, said, “We’re the soup. They’re the spice.”

There’s no end to the à la carte options entrepreneurial educators can create, which means there’s no end to the combinations that parents will be able to create for their kids.



Toni and Uli Frallicciardi, founders of Surf Skate Science

Kassandra Rodriguez has two sons—Zachary, 11, and Cameron, 8—who benefit from Florida’s ESA for students with special needs. She uses the ESAs to pay for speech therapy, dyslexia tutoring, piano lessons, writing lessons via Outschool, enrichment courses at a hybrid home school, and more.

She also uses the ESAs for Surf Skate Science.

At one point, Zachary and Cameron built skateboards by hand, cutting the wood and sanding it themselves. They took a field trip to an Apple store to work on decorative graphics.

“THEY GET TO TOUCH AND FEEL AND GIVE THEIR INPUT ON WHATEVER THEY’RE WORKING ON. IT’S HANDS-ON LEARNING,” RODRIGUEZ SAID OF SURF SKATE SCIENCE. WITHOUT THE ESA, “WE WOULDN’T BE ABLE TO DO THIS.”

In 2018, the Frallicciardis were new home-school parents, just looking for ways to teach their kids science. Both have backgrounds in the subject—Toni, with a degree in ocean engineering, and Uli, with decades of experience designing skate parks.

They decided to teach weekly classes at the beach and the skatepark, where they could tie surfing and skating to physics, engineering, marine biology, and other scientific disciplines. They wanted the lessons to be rich in content and fun.



Surf Skate Science lessons happen at the beach or in skateparks like this one, Lot 11 in Miami, which was built under an I-95 overpass.

“We thought, ‘If I was a student, what would I like to do?’ “ Toni Frallicciardi said. “And, ‘What could you learn if you weren’t in a normal school? If you weren’t stuck in a normal classroom?’ “

The typical Surf Skate Science lesson involves 45 minutes of instruction and 45 minutes of surfing or skating. The lesson covers key facts and concepts and includes a hands-on portion, such as mixing concrete and making mini skate ramps out of molds.

The Frallicciardis weave in math, writing, art, design, and homework.

For one assignment, students had to find out who to contact in local government to get a skate park built. For another, they examined Census data to determine how many young people were within a certain geographic area and how many skate parks might be needed to accommodate them.

The students frequently meet with experts, from skate park architects to scientists from local universities and organizations like the [Broward County Sea Turtle Conservation Program](#). Some of them recently joined marine biologists from the University of Miami for shark tagging.

“You’re doing real life,” Toni Frallicciardi said.

The alternative education boom in South Florida got a boost from two unfortunate events: The mass shooting at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in 2018 and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Both left more families dissatisfied with traditional schools and hungry for alternatives.

In 2018, Surf Skate Science had five students. Today, it has 500, with another 110 on a waitlist. The outfit also organizes science-related field trips that reach another 2,000 students a year.

THIS À LA CARTE THING IS CATCHING SOME SERIOUS AIR.





This Eye of a Scientist student is holding an “astronaut lander” that she built and later modified, based on how well it held its “astronaut” (some cotton balls) when dropped from different heights.

EYE OF A SCIENTIST

Florida has long had a [critical shortage of public school science teachers](#). But growing numbers of students in South Florida’s booming alternative education networks are learning science from a real-life scientist.

Dr. Neymi Layne Mignocchi has two master’s degrees in biology and experimental psychology and a Ph.D. in neuroscience. She worked for six years as a molecular biologist at the [Max Planck Florida Institute for Neuroscience](#). Her research accomplishments include developing a genetically encoded sensor for oxytocin, which plays a critical role in childbirth.

After the birth of her first child four years ago, Mignocchi decided to home-school and embark on a career path that would combine her love for science with her love for teaching.

[Eye of a Scientist](#) customizes experiential science lessons for students who are either home-schooled or in micro-schools. Most of them are in elementary grades.

Mignocchi began three years ago with 30 students. Now she’s teaching more than 150. The demand is so great that Mignocchi recently hired a graduate student in science to help teach some of her classes, and she’s interviewed a second for the likely expansion ahead.

“THIS IS PROGRESSING FASTER THAN I EVER EXPECTED,” SHE SAID.

Mignocchi’s goal is to inspire students and teachers.

She wants the former to know that they, too, can grow up to be scientists and the latter to know that there are other ways to deliver science instruction that might be more effective for students and rewarding for themselves.

On a muggy morning last fall at Tree Tops Park in Davie, about 10 miles from Fort Lauderdale, Eye of a Scientist was in full swing with a dozen kids in grades K-2 and their gently hovering parents.



Dr. Neymi Layne Mignocchi, founder of Eye of a Scientist

This day’s lesson was all about carbon.

Mignocchi started with the big picture, telling the kids about matter, atoms, and subatomic particles. At the same time, she doled out craft supplies for the fun part: building a 3-D replica of a carbon atom. She proceeded to spell out directions for constructing the atoms out of pipe cleaners and colored beads while peppering the students with more facts and concepts.

The Eye of a Scientist had The Flow of a Maestro. Somehow, every student stayed focused on what they were building and what they were learning.

“Carbon is the backbone of life,” Mignocchi told them. “Without carbon, life would not exist. Without carbon, you would not exist.”

Repeating definitions and fun facts was part of the lesson.

“Do bananas have carbon in them?” YES!

“Do apples have carbon in them?” YES!

“Do pancakes have carbon in them?” YES!

At the end of the lesson, each student had a colorful model of a carbon atom, complete with six electrons, six protons, and six neutrons, that they could hang in their homes. They also had their first lesson in chemistry which Mignocchi would build on with future lessons.

“You have to prime these students’ brains,” she said.

“You have to do it when they’re the most curious, when they’re younger.”

“TEACHING IN THIS MANNER HELPS STUDENTS CONNECT WITH THE INFORMATION BECAUSE THEY’RE LITERALLY EXPERIENCING IT IN REAL LIFE,” SHE CONTINUED. “THEY’RE LEARNING TO UNDERSTAND THE WORLD THEY’RE LIVING IN, IN A BETTER, MORE DIRECT WAY IN COMPARISON TO SITTING DOWN IN THE CLASSROOM AND JUST READING SOME PARAGRAPH ABOUT IT.”



Many of the students at the micro-schools and co-ops that Eye of a Scientist orbits use ESAs. Mignocchi recently became an approved provider through Step Up For Students, the nonprofit that administers the state’s choice scholarships (and employs the author of this white paper), so parents can channel ESA funds to her directly rather than pay out of pocket and seek reimbursement. Her expectation is that this will allow her to serve an even broader range of students.

Mignocchi’s life story informs her mission. Her family fled Venezuela for America when she was 8 years old, and she went on to become a straight-A student in public schools. But she found out when she got to college that she was not ready to meet basic expectations in science.

Later, Mignocchi spent time tutoring public school students in science and found that they, too, were woefully unprepared.

With Eye of a Scientist, Mignocchi aims to fill those gaps, particularly with low-income students. That’s another reason, she said, she supports ESAs. They will allow more low-income families to access learning alternatives that may be best for their kids but in the past were out of reach.

“What I want,” she said, “is a level playing field.”

THE LIVING SCHOOL

Joelle Smith's school-on-wheels is literally a dream come true.

In 2022, Smith had a dream so vivid it woke her at 4 a.m. It built on a vision she had in her 20s before she became a public school teacher, in which she imagined herself leading tours of students abroad. This time, the dream included a bus.

A few months later, The Living School was born.

"IT'S ABOUT USING THE WORLD TO LEARN," SMITH SAID. "IT'S ABOUT HOW MUCH WE HAVE IN OUR COMMUNITY. WE'RE SUCH A MELTING POT HERE. THERE'S SO MUCH CULTURE. IT'S INCREDIBLE."

The Living School offers customized field trips that Smith calls "missions."

All but two of her students have special needs, many of them on the autism spectrum. She picks them up in a 14-seat Ford Starcraft, then transports them to parks, museums, nature centers, farms, historic houses, the airport, the beach...

The list is potentially endless. And Smith is just getting started.

Last year, The Living School began with five students. This year, it has 25. The students range in age from 6 to 18. All but one use an ESA.

"I guess I knew the potential, but I didn't expect it would happen," Smith said. "It's a little crazy."

Smith was a middle school teacher for 13 years. She taught language arts and drama. In 2012, she underwent brain surgery and resigned for medical reasons. She later worked at a tutoring center for home-schoolers.

Leveraging ESAs allowed her to create her own model and shape it in a way that she felt was best for students.

In traditional schools, Smith said, she had little flexibility to personalize instruction and little time to build relationships. For a language arts class one summer, she had to stick to a script administrators handed down for every single lesson.

AT THE LIVING SCHOOL, SHE SAID, "I DON'T HAVE TO FOLLOW ANYBODY'S PACE. I CAN MEET THE KIDS WHERE THEY ARE. IT'S NIGHT AND DAY!"

Before each trip, Smith works with parents to personalize a lesson plan for their child. Do they want the focus on certain academic subjects or on non-academic subjects? She ties the list of subject areas to the theme of the day's visit and assigns readings and exercises that bridge the two.

For a recent trip to [Butterfly World](#), a younger student was assigned a word search related to butterflies to work on vocabulary and motor skills. An older student was assigned a graphing exercise for math and an article on butterfly migration that Smith supplemented with questions to answer in writing.



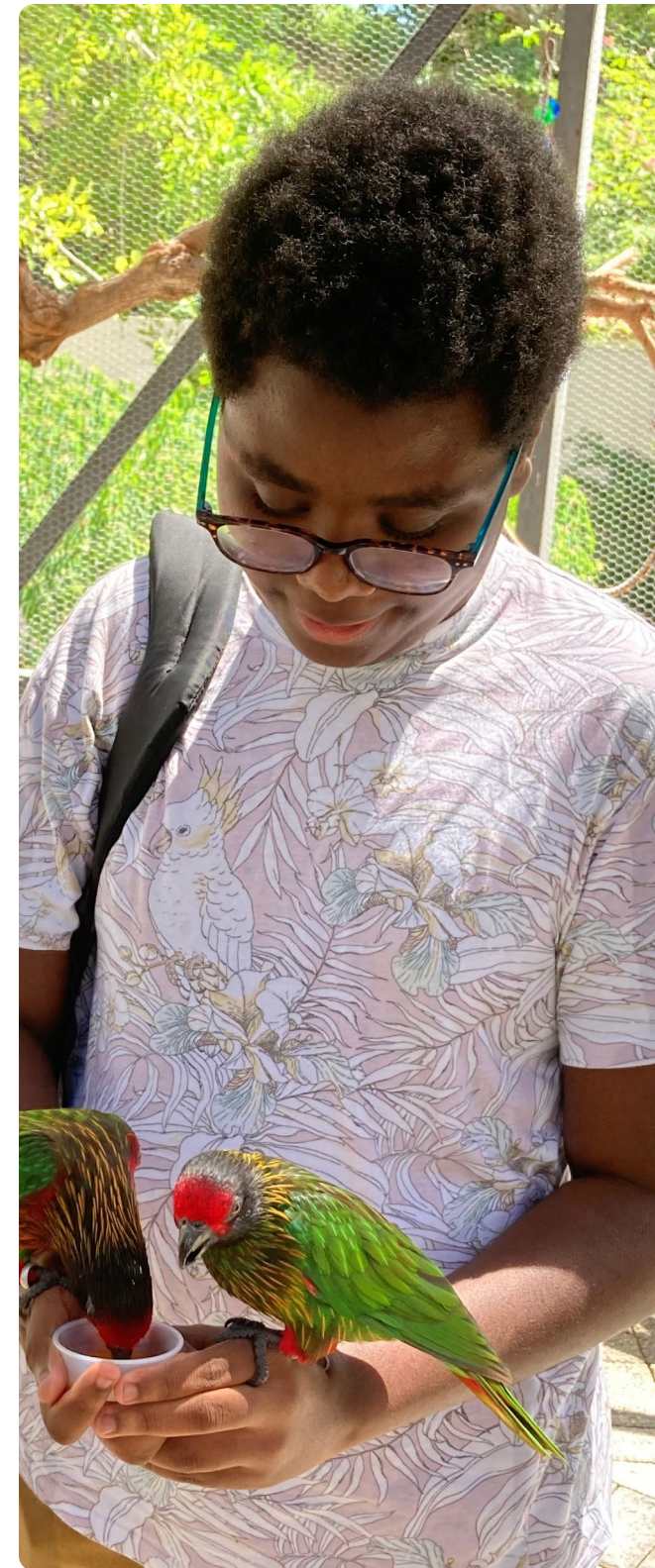
Joelle Smith, founder of The Living School

Life skills are a big part of the mix. One of Smith's students is 14 years old and already taking and excelling in classes at a state college. But his family wanted more opportunities for him to mingle with other kids. "So he comes to socialize," Smith said. "And he does a lot of that."

Sharon Ayalon said she enrolled her son Ben, 16, in The Living School last fall and "it saved our lives."

Ben is on the autism spectrum. He struggles with anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder. He attended four private schools before The Living School. None of them worked.

"My son is not a sit-in-a-classroom kind of child," Ayalon said. "When he's forced to sit in a typical environment, it will not only not click, he'll have behavior issues. He has to move."



The Living School takes students to educational destinations all over South Florida, including Butterfly World in Coconut Creek, home to a butterfly house and research center, botanical gardens, and aviaries.



At Ben's last school, incidents like spitting and throwing things escalated. Ayalon said she knew she had to make a change and, in researching alternative schools, came across The Living School. Many schools would not have given her son a shot, Ayalon said. But Smith told her, "Let's give it a try."

The result? For the first time in his life, Ben is excited to go to school. His behavior issues have disappeared, both at home and at the private school he attends part-time using the ESA.

Ayalon credited Smith's approach and Ben's field-trip peers, who she described as role models for him.

The change is "beyond learning," Ayalon said. "It's the happiness on his face."

Smith said she's thrilled and terrified about the path she's on.

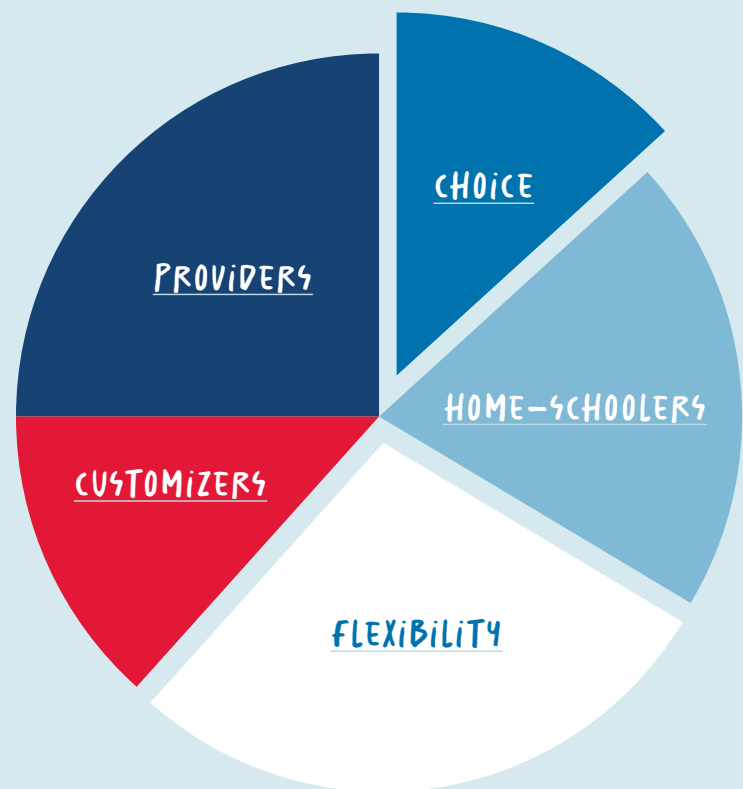
She knows she and other teacher entrepreneurs are in uncharted territory. At the same time, creating her own thing has been a rush.

"WHEN I LOOK OUT AND SEE MY STUDENTS INTERACTING WITH EACH OTHER, I'M JUST FILLED WITH COMPLETE AND UTTER JOY," SMITH SAID. "THIS IS WHAT I GET TO DO EVERY DAY!"

THE COMBO PLATTER

A combination of factors is helping juice what's happening in South Florida. Essentially: More choice, more flexibility, and more home-schoolers are yielding ever more resourceful parents and ever more responsive providers.

Here's a little more on each of those ingredients behind the rise of à la carte learning.



01 MORE CHOICE

Florida has long been home to one of the nation's most robust and diverse arrays of school choice and education choice scholarships. In fact, this year marks the 25th anniversary of Florida's first private school choice program.

Now Florida has "universal choice." In March 2023, the Florida Legislature passed, and Gov. Ron DeSantis signed, House Bill 1. The law makes every student in Florida, all 3.4 million at present and all students going forward, eligible for a state-supported ESA.

As Figure 1 shows, the number of Florida students using education choice scholarships continues to rise steadily. This year, more than 380,000 students used them.

Over time, eligibility for scholarships expanded, as did the amount of funding per scholarship and the total amount of state support for scholarships.

The result: More and more families have been gaining access to more and more options. As they've done so, more and more providers have entered the market to create them.

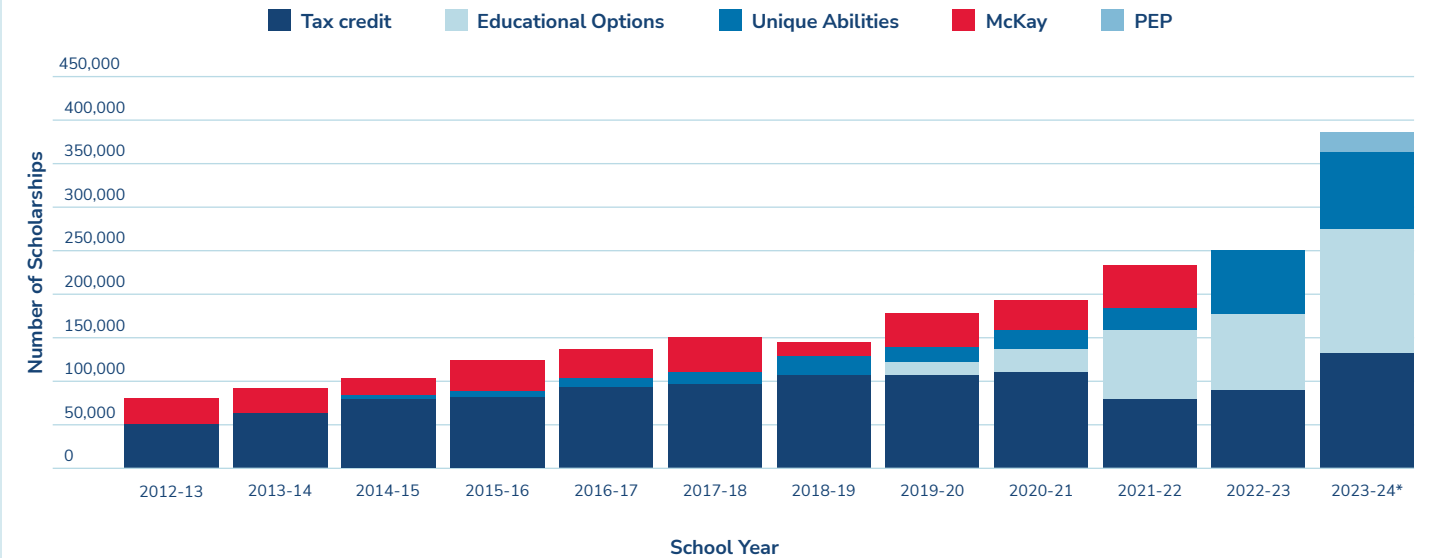
02 MORE FLEXIBILITY

ESAs are far more flexible than traditional school choice scholarships because parents can use the funds for more than just tuition and fees at a private school. Thousands of Florida families, led by parents of students with special needs, have been pioneering the use of ESAs to customize their child's education, often by relying on a suite of à la carte providers.

There are multiple types of ESA scholarships in Florida, with different degrees of funding and flexibility.

COMBO PLATTER

FIG. 1 GROWTH OF FLORIDA EDUCATIONAL CHOICE SCHOLARSHIPS



Source: Florida Department of Education and Step Up For Students. *The 2023-24 numbers reflect scholarship numbers through May 2024.

SCHOLARSHIPS FOR EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS

Two scholarships are included in this category: [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 by the state.

Both scholarships are worth the same amount, with the average ranging between \$7,430 and \$8,120 this school year, depending on grade level and county of residence. Both can be used for some programs and services beyond tuition, such as tutors, curriculum, and instructional materials. Only a small percentage of FTC and FES-EO families have ESA funds remaining after tuition.

SCHOLARSHIPS FOR STUDENTS WITH UNIQUE ABILITIES

Florida created an ESA for students with special needs in 2014. It's 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, and converted it into an ESA. The FES-UA is worth about \$10,000 per year, and it's Florida's most flexible ESA. It can be used for a wide range of programs and services, including tuition, tutors, therapists, curriculum, instructional materials, digital devices, and specialized after-school and summer school programs.

PERSONALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAM

HB 1 also created a new opportunity for students who are not enrolled in full-time public or private schools. The [Personalized Education Program](#), or PEP, is a subset of the FTC Scholarship. It was available to 20,000 students in the 2023-24 school year and will be available for up to 40,000 additional

students each subsequent year through 2027, after which the participation cap will be removed. PEP scholarships are valued the same as FTC and FES-EO scholarships and can be used for the same categories of expenses. As with those other scholarships, state law requires PEP students to annually take a norm-referenced test in math and reading, which will be good to keep in mind as debates over "accountability" inevitably arise.

NEW WORLDS SCHOLARSHIP ACCOUNTS

This is an ESA currently available to public school students in grades K-5 who are struggling in reading and/or math. It can be used for part-time tutoring, summer and after-school literacy programs, curriculum, instructional materials, and more. New Worlds Scholarships awarded for the 2024-25 school year will also be available to students in Voluntary Prekindergarten and the per-scholarship amount will increase from \$500 to \$1,200.

03 MORE HOME-SCHOOLERS

Home schooling has been on the rise nationally⁶, and Florida is no exception. Over the past five years, the number of home-schooled students in Florida has risen 72 percent to 154,289.⁷ The biggest spike came in 2020 after the COVID-19 pandemic spurred school closings.

Broward County should be a national poster child for this shift. See Figure 2.

NO BIG URBAN DISTRICT IN FLORIDA HAS SEEN A BIGGER JUMP IN HOME-SCHOOLERS, EITHER IN RAW NUMBERS OR RATE OF GROWTH. BROWARD HAD 4,146 HOME-SCHOOLERS IN 2017-18. IT HAD 9,811 IN 2022-23. EVEN AFTER A DIP IN 2022-23, THAT'S A FIVE-YEAR JUMP OF 137 PERCENT.⁸

Miami-Dade County, to the south of Broward, had a 95 percent increase over that span; Palm Beach County, to the north, had a 70 percent increase⁹.

Thousands of new home-schoolers meant more families in search of à la carte options—and more opportunities for innovative providers.

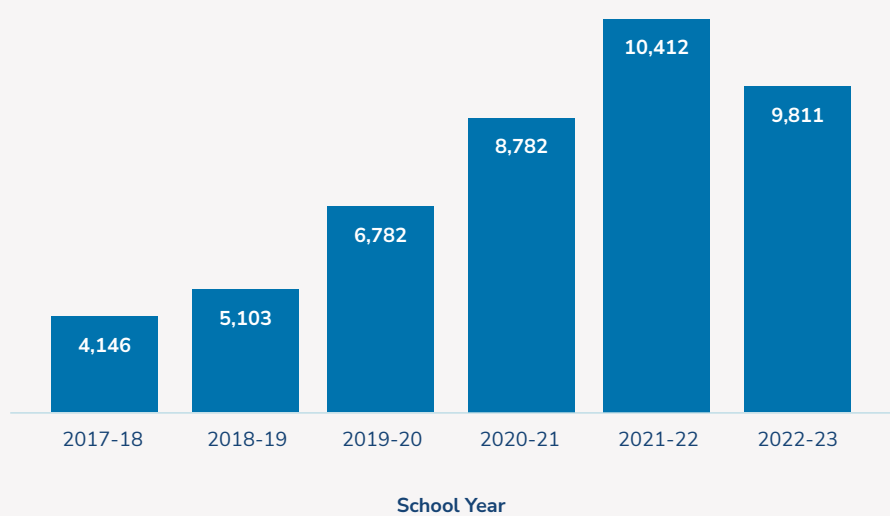
There are a number of factors to watch as the trend lines unfold.

A key one is the new PEP scholarship. It's likely to make parent-directed learning more attractive to families who previously didn't have the financial resources to make it work.

On a related note, HB 1 also highlighted an excellent opportunity for à la carte options in public schools. It made part-time enrollment in public schools explicitly available to Florida families, including home-schoolers and families who do parent-directed learning.

There seems to be limited awareness about this option, but that may change as more families realize the massive buffet of "course choices" right in front of them.

FIG. 2 NUMBER OF HOME-SCHOOL STUDENTS IN BROWARD COUNTY



Source: Florida Department of Education

04 MORE CUSTOMIZERS

The rise of à la carte learning providers in South Florida coincides with a rise in parents who want à la carte learning. Even before the 2023 change in Florida law made every student eligible for an ESA, thousands of Florida families were using ESAs for students with special needs.

In 2022-23, the parents of 19,488 Florida students were using ESAs to customize, according to data from Step Up For Students. See Figure 3. That is, they were spending ESA funds on at least two different categories of expenditures, such as tuition and tutors. That was more than triple the number from five years prior.

NEARLY HALF OF THOSE FAMILIES (9,328) WERE "INDEPENDENT CUSTOMIZERS."

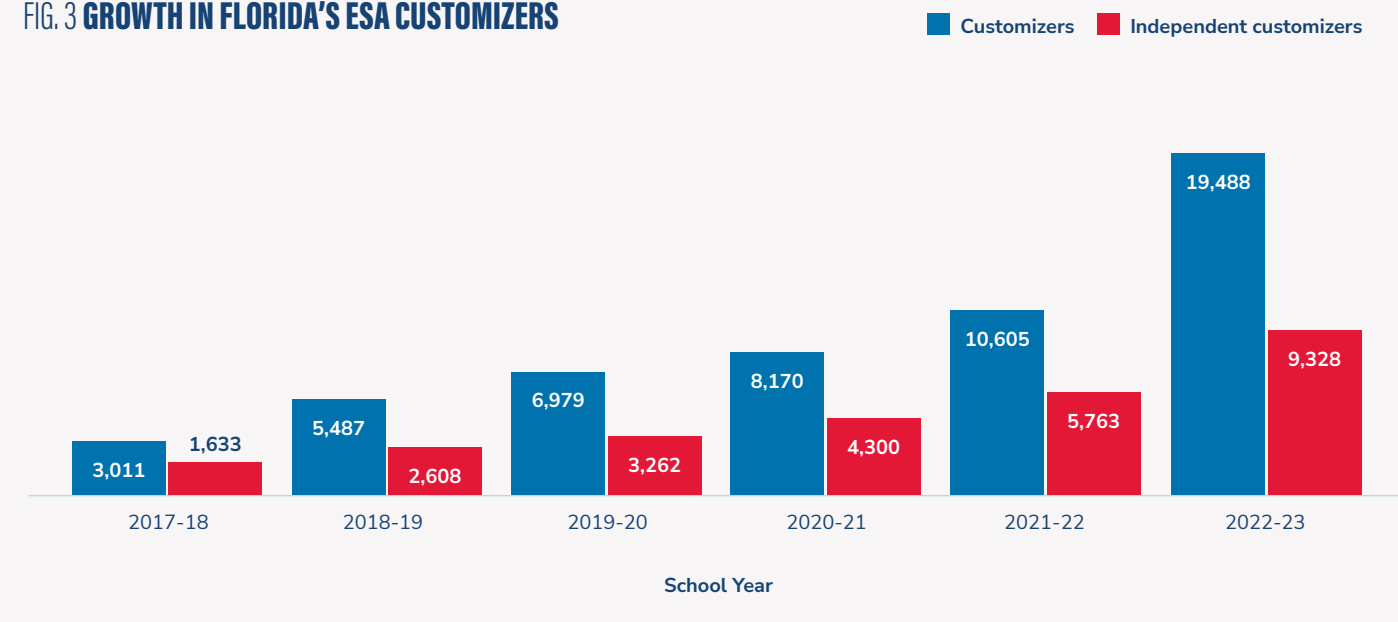
They were home-schooling their children and using ESA funds to purchase educational products and services in at least two categories other than private school tuition. That number, too, had more than tripled from five years prior.

Two studies have shed light on what Florida's pace-setting ESA families are doing.

A 2018 report from EdChoice, co-authored by Lindsey Burke and Jason Bedrick, looked at ESA spending patterns during the first two years of the unique abilities ESA program, in 2014-15 and 2015-16. In year one, 35 percent of the students were customizing. In year two, 42 percent were. About half of those families were what Burke and Bedrick called "independent customizers."¹⁰

More recently, a 2022 report from Michelle Lofton at the University of Georgia and Marty Lueken at EdChoice

FIG. 3 GROWTH IN FLORIDA'S ESA CUSTOMIZERS



Source: Step Up For Students

examined ESA spending patterns from 2014-15 to 2018-19. They found the longer that families used the ESA, the more they spent each year; the more frequently they made purchases; and the more diverse their expenditures became. Over time, ESA families as a whole spent less on tuition and more on curriculum, tutoring, and therapists.¹¹

05 MORE PROVIDERS

As more Florida parents have accessed ESAs, they have pulled thousands of providers beyond schools into a redefined public education system.

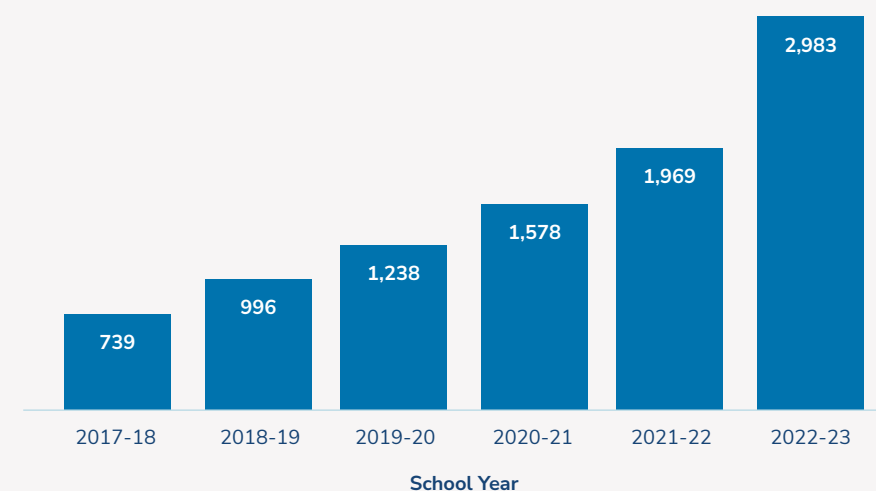
For one example, consider the growing number of tutors who receive ESA funding. See Figure 4.

Between 2017-18 and 2022-23, the number of full- and part-time tutors serving Florida ESA families quadrupled, climbing from 739 to 2,983, according to Step Up For Students data. (That number does not include tutors serving students using the New Worlds scholarship.)

Many of these tutors are traditional, but a small but growing number are like those spotlighted in this white paper: entrepreneurs who created a fresh approach to whatever realm parents deemed educationally valuable—and then could be paid with ESA funds.

The number of independent therapists serving ESA families is also growing. According to Step Up data, between 2017-18 and 2022-23, the number of ESA-funded individuals offering speech therapy, physical therapy, occupational therapy, Applied Behavior Analysis, and other therapies rose from 2,008 to 4,790.

FIG. 4. TOTAL PROVIDERS UTILIZED FOR PRIVATE TUTORING SERVICES



Source: Step Up For Students

TO GO



Berkeley law professors Jack Coons (left) and Stephen Sugarman described what we now call education savings accounts - and a system of à la carte learning - in their 1978 book, "Education by Choice."

À LA CARTE VISIONARIES

The rise of à la carte learning via ESAs may be new. But the idea isn't.

Back in the disco days of 1978, a couple of University of California, Berkeley law professors who were leading supporters of education choice pitched the idea in a well-received book that has since become a classic.

In "Education by Choice: The Case for Family Control," John E. "Jack" Coons and Stephen Sugarman re-imagined the traditional public school system.¹²

The book describes and endorses what we now call charter schools (Coons and Sugarman called them "public scholarship schools"); ESAs (they referred to "divisible educational experiences"); micro-schools ("minischools"); learning pods ("living room schools"); and even choice navigators (they referred to an "education broker or clearing house" that would link families to options for a small fee paid out of the state-funded choice scholarship).

Ahead of the curve, for sure.

But Coons and Sugarman were most enthusiastic about what they called "personally tailored education," which basically amounted to à la carte learning:

"To us, a more attractive idea is matching up a child and a series of individual instructors who operate independently from one another. Studying reading in the morning at Ms. Kay's house, spending two afternoons a week learning a foreign language in Mr. Buxbaum's electronic laboratory, and going on nature walks and playing tennis the other afternoons under the direction of Mr. Phillips could be a rich package for a ten-year-old."

They continued:

"... Kay, Buxbaum, and Phillips need have no organizational ties with one another. Nor would all children studying with Kay need to spend time with Buxbaum and Phillips; instead some would do math with Mr. Feller or animal care with Mr. Vetter. This system for arranging a personally tailored education through state subsidy has the additional advantage of easily accommodating part-time teachers."

"Education by Choice" foreshadowed the joyous uprising of education entrepreneurs in South Florida. Coons and Sugarman even described the possibility of a "mobile school" (The Living School!) and predicted the hurdles micro-schools and pods would face with local building and zoning codes.

The Berkeley duo isn't important just because they had uncanny foresight. Their often-overlooked vision says a lot about the intentionally buried politics of school choice.

For decades, opponents of choice have characterized it as some kind of vast, right-wing plot. Many political conservatives have been staunch supporters of choice; their absolutely vital contributions to advancing education freedom should be honored. But it's undisputable that education choice has deep roots—and continued support—all along the political spectrum.

À LA CARTE CHALLENGES

The ferment in South Florida suggests a growing demand for à la carte learning and growing activity among education entrepreneurs to meet that demand. At the same time, it's not hard to find:

- Parents who don't realize, even in a state with universal choice, that ESAs are available.¹³
- Education providers who do not realize they can leverage ESA funding to reach more students.
- Potential providers who do not realize they have the skills to offer a marketable education service.
- Still other potential providers who do know what's possible yet are stymied by barriers both common to many entrepreneurs and specific to their niche.

Policymakers, philanthropists, choice advocates, scholarship funding organizations, colleges of education, and others all have roles to play in mitigating these barriers. Among the improvement opportunities:

BETTER INFORMING TEACHERS

Traditional educators, by and large, do not realize the possibilities now available to them with the expansion of education choice, even in those states that are choice leaders. In Florida, conditions are increasingly favorable to entrepreneurs who want to create options, whether it's a school or an à la carte provider. Choice advocates and others should work to better inform educators about these opportunities, particularly public school educators experiencing historic levels of frustration.

BETTER EQUIPPING TEACHERS

Colleges of education should consider programming that better prepares up-and-coming teachers for sustained success in a rapidly evolving education environment that is increasingly choice-driven. That means not only having the tools necessary to work in options across sectors but also having the chops

to create their own options. Thankfully, the [National Microschooling Center](#) and a number of micro-school networks, including some in South Florida, are helping entrepreneurs start their own micro-schools, while groups like the [yes. every kid. foundation](#) are helping those entrepreneurs [navigate regulatory hurdles](#). Similar efforts directed at potential à la carte providers would be welcome.

BETTER ONBOARDING PROVIDERS

The process of approving and onboarding providers to participate in the growing marketplace for ESAs must be smooth, quick, and transparent. Potential providers should have easy access to clear approval criteria, and there should be clear, immediate feedback from scholarship funding organizations and/or state education departments for any questions that arise.

BETTER DEFINING PROVIDERS

À la carte providers in Florida are often paid as tutors, but the current statutory requirements for tutors appear to be limited. For example, they do not appear to allow many people skilled in the trades, such as electricians and carpenters, to be approved tutors. Policymakers may want to consider expanding eligibility requirements to include professionals with state licenses, and establishing a process where provider eligibility requirements can be regularly revisited and revised.

IMPROVING PAYMENT PROCESSES

Approved providers must be able to secure ESA funds quickly and efficiently. Ditto for parents who pay providers out of pocket and need to be reimbursed. Approved providers must be able to secure ESA funds quickly and efficiently. Ditto for parents who pay providers out of pocket and need to be reimbursed. In Florida this spring, Gov. Ron DeSantis signed into law a number of changes to strengthen Florida's choice scholarship programs, including new schedules to speed up state funding cycles and new requirements related to reimbursement processes, such as requiring scholarship funding organizations to report to the state quarterly the average number of days for reimbursement review and approval for programs that allow reimbursement options.

FINDING START-UP FUNDS

Many entrepreneurs face challenges with start-up funding. Some of the providers spotlighted in this paper later received grants from the [VELA Education Fund](#), which has done ground-breaking work assisting education entrepreneurs nationwide. In Indiana, the National Microschooling Center, in conjunction with Mind Trust and EdChoice, is awarding competitive grants (and training) to those wanting to start micro-schools. Seeding promising à la carte providers would be fruitful, too.

DISCUSSION

TO GO

The merry band of education entrepreneurs in South Florida has an audacious analogy for the alternative universe they're building. They sometimes refer to it as "the South Florida Renaissance," or "the Broward County Renaissance," or just simply, "The Renaissance."

It's a delightful contrast to the dark rhetoric that opponents of school choice employed 25 years ago. When Florida debated and created its first private school choice program in 1999, opponents predicted choice "will kill public education,"¹⁵ that it was "a bigger threat than any kid walking into a school with a gun,"¹⁶ that it would leave low-performing students "on the garbage heap."¹⁷

Despite those predictions, the sky never fell—even as the growth in Florida's choice programs accelerated.

In the late 1990s, Florida students ranked No. 27, No. 28, and No. 33 on the four core math and reading tests of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, once adjusted for demographics. (And back then, not every state participated in those tests.) By the most recent iteration of that measure, in 2019, Florida students ranked No. 1, No. 1, No. 3, and No. 8.¹⁸

Better academic outcomes, though, aren't even the best part.

Choice unleashed the overlooked brilliance of everyday people to help find solutions to whatever educational challenges they face. All over Florida, parents, teachers, and communities of all stripes have been leveraging choice programs to create their own schools in line with their needs and wants.

The transition from school choice to education choice is just the next phase.

Many parents will continue to seek the best, whole package deal of a school. But if, for whatever reason, they prefer to assemble a more personalized program, they can. Schools, meanwhile, can turn to à la carte providers to supplement core offerings. And teachers and other potential entrepreneurs can look to them to spark new ways of actualizing their visions for teaching and learning.

The à la carte providers in South Florida are just getting started. But they're already showing us what a world of limitless learning options can look like.

BACK OF HOUSE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION

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, and the New Worlds Scholarship Accounts.

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Special thanks to the South Florida Innovative Education Network, aka InEd, and to its co-founders, Shiren Rattigan and Toni Frallicciardi, for being a constant source of awe and inspiration.

ENDNOTES

1. The Broward County school district abuts the Miami-Dade County school district to the south and the Palm Beach County school district to the north. Those three districts are, respectively, the sixth-, fourth-, and 10th-biggest in America. For more: Enrollment, poverty, and federal funds for the 120 largest school districts, by enrollment size in 2021: School year 2019-20 and fiscal year 2022. (2022). Digest of Education Statistics, Table 2015.30, National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_215.30.asp
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10. Burke, L., & Bedrick, J. (2018). Personalizing Education: How Florida Families Use Education Savings Accounts. EdChoice. <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Personalizing-Education-By-Lindsey-Burke-and-Jason-Bedrick.pdf>
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12. Coons, J., & Sugarman, S. (1978). Education by Choice: The Case for Family Control. Berkeley: The University of California Press.
13. This is particularly true of lower-income families, according to a 2023 Tyton Partners survey of more than 1,200 parents in the two leading ESA states, Florida and Arizona. 55 percent of parents with household incomes of less than \$50,000 a year were unaware of ESAs, compared to 29 percent of parents with household incomes in the \$100,000-\$150,000 range. See "Paying for Choice 2024, Part II: Addressing the Awareness and Accessibility Gap of ESAs," p. 9. <https://tytonpartners.com/paying-for-choice-2024/>
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15. Quote from Leon Russell, then chairman of the Florida NAACP. From: Kleindeinst, L. (1999, May 1). Vouchers Ok'd before bell; Florida became the first state to approve vouchers to attend private schools. Critics vow to fight in court. Orlando Sentinel, p. A1.
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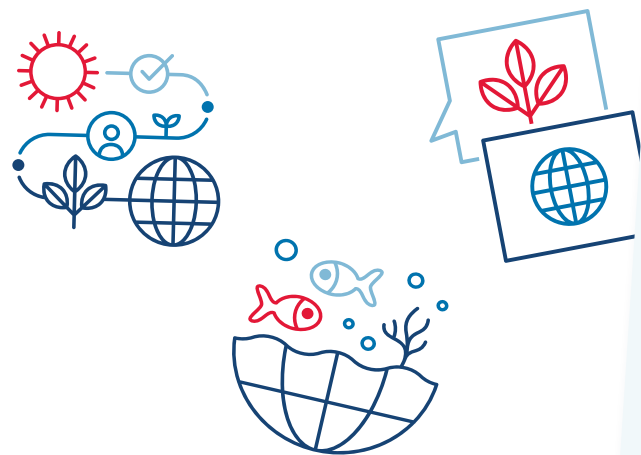


À LA CARTE IN ACTION



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Wondering what à la carte learning is really like? Scan the QR code to see an informational video with first-hand perspectives from the world of à la carte learning.



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