



# GOING WITH PLAN B

Why thousands of Florida  
parents didn't use their school  
choice scholarships





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# TAKEAWAYS



**THOUSANDS OF FAMILIES WANT TO USE SCHOOL CHOICE SCHOLARSHIPS BUT CAN'T**

- Parents of about 41,000 Florida students awarded school choice scholarships for the 2024-25 school year did not use them.
- The top reason, according to 34.7% of parents who responded to this Step Up For Students survey: “No availability at the school I wanted.”
- Meanwhile, 19.7% of respondents said the scholarship amount was not enough.

**MANY FAMILIES STILL FIND OPTIONS THEY CONSIDER BETTER THAN THEIR PRIOR SCHOOLS**

- More than a third of the respondents (36.5%) switched from one type of school to another — for example, from a traditional public school to a charter school.
- More respondents showed a positive rather than a negative shift in satisfaction between their child’s prior school and their current school (20.4% to 10.5%).
- The shift was significantly more positive for those who switched away from zoned public schools (62.7% to 6.0%).

**MOST OF THOSE FAMILIES, HOWEVER, CONTINUE TO WANT A PRIVATE SCHOOL**

- 66.7% of respondents said they would apply for the scholarships again.
- That includes 63.0% of those who switched school types, and 55.5% of those who said they were satisfied or very satisfied after doing so.





# FOR THE PAST QUARTER CENTURY, FLORIDA HAS BEEN A NATIONAL LEADER IN EDUCATION CHOICE

In 1999, then-Florida Gov. Jeb Bush led the charge to create the first, modern, statewide private school choice program in America. Today, more than 500,000 Florida students use state-supported choice scholarships;<sup>1</sup> more than 50% of all K-12 students in Florida are educated in something other than zoned neighborhood schools;<sup>2</sup> and roughly 1 million are enrolled in options outside of district schools entirely.<sup>3</sup> Over the course of a single generation, choice in Florida moved from the fringes of public education to a defining feature.

Multiple programs have been key to this transformation, including the Florida Tax Credit (FTC) Scholarship and the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Educational Options (FES-EO). The former was established in 2001. It's funded by corporate contributions in return for dollar-for-dollar tax credits. For most of its existence, it was limited to low-income families. The FES-EO was established in 2019 and is funded directly by the state. It, too, was initially means-tested. In 2023, however, Gov. Ron DeSantis signed into law HB 1, which removed

income-based eligibility limits and made both programs available to every K-12 student in Florida. The result has been an unprecedented surge in usage. The two programs now serve more than 300,000 students, a two-year increase of roughly 70%.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of both participant effects<sup>5</sup> and competitive effects,<sup>6</sup> there is compelling evidence that Florida students, particularly low-income students,<sup>7</sup> have benefited from the expansion of choice.

At the same time, it's clear from the gap between the number of scholarships awarded and the number actually used that some families still can't access the schools they want.



To learn more, we surveyed those families. We wanted to find out:

- What were the barriers to school choice scholarship use?
- What motivated the parents to seek the scholarships?
- What kinds of schools were their children enrolled in when they applied?
- What kinds of schools did they end up in?
- How satisfied were they with their children's schools at the time they applied?
- How satisfied were they with the schools they ultimately enrolled their children in?

Over the years, multiple surveys from across America have gained valuable information from parents using choice scholarships. To our knowledge, our survey is the first to focus on parents who were awarded scholarships but did not use them. We emailed surveys to 32,283 parents and received a total of 2,739 complete responses.

### AMONG THE FINDINGS

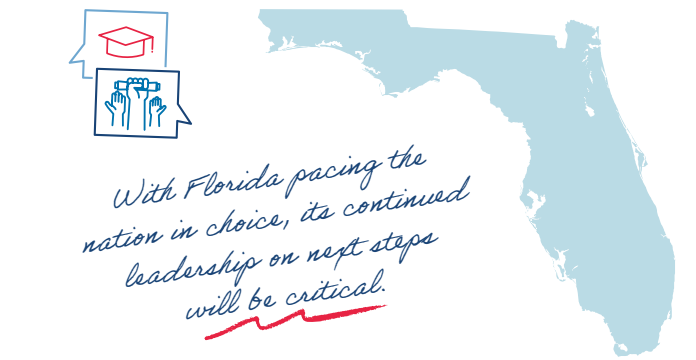
- A majority of respondents, 63.1%, said their children were enrolled in something other than their zoned public schools when they applied for the scholarship. The 36.9% whose children were enrolled in zoned schools were the single largest group of applicants by school type.
- 55.0% of the respondents were somewhat satisfied or very satisfied with their child's school at the time they applied for the scholarship, while 30.2% were somewhat dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.
- At the same time, 87.6% said getting the scholarship was very important, and another 8.5% said it was moderately important.
- More parents sought the scholarship for financial reasons than any other factor (68.1%). That was followed by a desire for more individual attention for their child (48.7%), stronger academic programs (40.9%), and a school that reflected their values (40.1%).
- The No. 1 reason parents did not use the scholarship was a lack of availability at their desired school, at 34.7%. That was followed by the scholarship amount being inadequate (19.7%) and concerns about additional costs beyond tuition and fees (19.6%).
- Ultimately, the respondents' children ended up enrolled in higher rates in every type of school we listed except private school, where the percentage enrolled dropped 8 percentage points. The biggest changes were in charter schools (+2.3 percentage points), open enrollment public schools (+1.7 percentage points), and virtual schools (+1.7 percentage points).

- More than any other reason, respondents said they selected the school they did because it was the most practical choice (45.5%). That was followed by stronger academic programs (30.6%), a physically safer environment (25.6%), and more individual attention (25.3%).
- Despite not using the scholarships, respondents were more likely to experience a positive shift in satisfaction with their child's schooling situation than a negative one: 10.5% indicated a decrease in satisfaction; 20.4% showed an increase.
- And yet, 66.7% indicated they would apply for the scholarship again. Among those who switched from one type of school to another, 63.0% said they would apply again, including 55.3% of those who were satisfied or very satisfied after doing so.



### AMONG THE CONSIDERATIONS

These insights from parents offer considerations for policymakers in Florida and beyond. Florida's private school sector is growing. But policymakers can take meaningful measures to further invigorate supply. Among the possibilities: mitigating the building and zoning hurdles that sometimes impede the creation of new private schools; enhancing the scholarship amounts for low-income families; and encouraging new transportation models that can better serve students in this era of choice. At the same time, the survey responses underscore how dynamic Florida's choice-driven system has become. Many families now routinely interact with multiple sectors, schools, and providers. Potential solutions for bolstering supply should consider how families are sorting through this ever-growing menu of options — and seek to enhance access to whatever options they choose. With Florida pacing the nation in choice, its continued leadership on next steps will be critical.





# FLORIDA’S PRIVATE SCHOOL SECTOR HAS BEEN GROWING AT A STEADY CLIP, AND YET...

*About 41,000 students who were awarded private school scholarships did not use them.*

Between 2012-13 and 2022-23, according to the most recent state data, the number of private schools in Florida grew from 2,267 to 2,973.<sup>8</sup> That’s a net gain of 706 new private schools, or 31%, over the course of a decade. The state’s total K-12 enrollment growth over that span was 12.4%.<sup>9</sup>

In many ways, this quiet boom actualizes the visions of an earlier generation of school choice enthusiasts, who encouraged policymakers to “let a thousand flowers bloom.” Florida’s private school sector is increasingly rich in diversity. Florida is the only major state to see Catholic schools growing.<sup>10</sup> Its Jewish schools are maxing out.<sup>11</sup> It now educates one in five Black students outside of district schools.<sup>12</sup> The Sunshine State is also home to a burgeoning number of classical schools,<sup>13</sup> microschools,<sup>14</sup> and nature schools.<sup>15</sup> And despite myths about the viability of choice in rural areas, some of the most innovative schools anywhere can be found in Florida’s most remote counties, sustained by families using choice scholarships.<sup>16</sup>

And yet, it’s not enough. In recent years, thousands of Florida students who were awarded school choice scholarships – scholarships worth approximately \$8,000 a year<sup>17</sup> – did not use them. For the 2024-25 school year, the parents of about 41,000 students from the state’s two general population programs fell into that category.

Through our survey, many of those parents gave us a better look at what’s happening.

## FIRST, MANY PARENTS CAN’T ACCESS OR AFFORD THE PRIVATE SCHOOLS THEY WANT

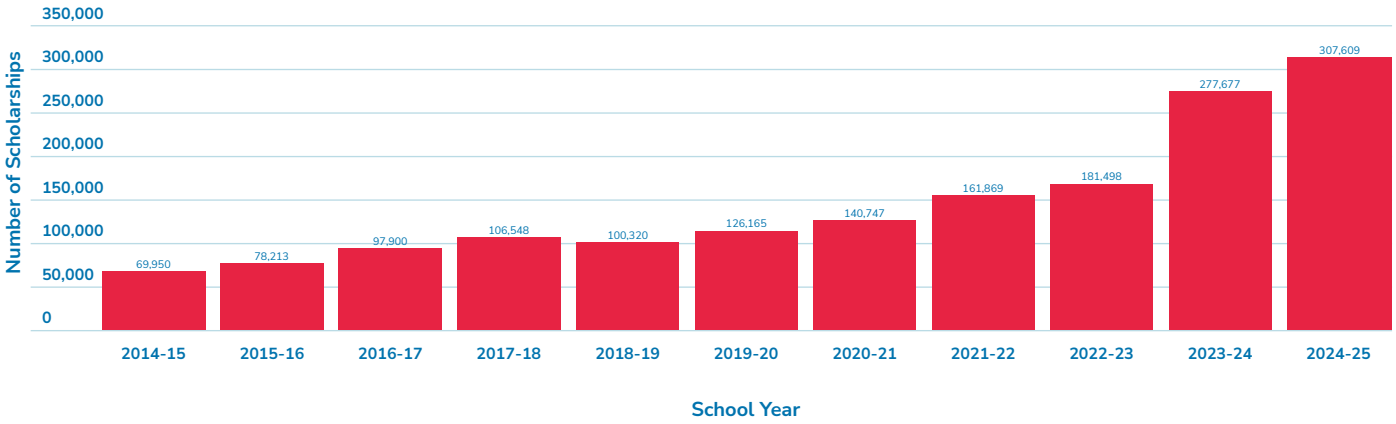
Their predicament recalls the common tweak on those famous lines from “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”: Water, water everywhere, but not a drop to drink. Florida parents see schools, schools everywhere. But thousands can’t enroll their children in the ones they want, even with state support. Sometimes, there are no open seats. Sometimes, they still can’t afford them. In a smaller but still significant number of cases, the schools are too far away and/or the parents can’t access them with existing transportation options. In most cases, the issues with affordability and accessibility are most acute for the Black, Hispanic, and low-income families who want the scholarships the most.

Given the backdrop, these challenges should not be a surprise. In the past 10 years, the number of Florida students using the state’s general population choice scholarships quadrupled, from 69,950 in 2014-15 to 307,609 in 2024-25.<sup>18</sup> See Figure 1. Some of those students were already enrolled in private schools, but many migrated from other sectors or would have been enrolled elsewhere. This year, private schools also served at least 60,000 additional students using another state scholarship, the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Students with Unique Abilities, which has also grown rapidly since its creation in 2014.<sup>19</sup> That’s a lot of students, across multiple choice programs, to absorb in a short amount of time.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, the big picture is hardly bleak. The responses to our survey suggest many parents value the other alternatives in Florida’s education landscape.



FIG. 1 GROWTH IN FLORIDA’S SCHOOL CHOICE SCHOLARSHIPS



These numbers reflect combined growth in the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship and Family Empowerment Scholarship for Educational Options, as administered by Step Up For Students. They do not include a small number of scholarships administered by another Scholarship Funding Organization, and they do not include the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Students with Unique Abilities or Personalized Education Program Scholarship.

## EVEN WITHOUT THE SCHOLARSHIP, SIGNIFICANT NUMBERS OF FAMILIES STILL FOUND LEARNING OPTIONS THEY LIKE

As a whole, parental satisfaction ended up higher with the schools the parents ultimately enrolled their children in. This is especially noteworthy given that more than half of the respondents (55.0%) were already satisfied with their child’s school at the time they applied for the scholarship, compared to 30.2% who were dissatisfied.

The responses suggest that for many parents, the choice wasn’t between a “bad” school and a “good” school, but between a good school and a better one. It also suggests that many families are finding quality schools across multiple sectors, including with district schools.

Again, given the backdrop, that shouldn’t be a surprise. Over the past quarter century, Florida’s public schools

have been among the most improved in the country, according to conventional measures like the National Assessment of Educational Progress;<sup>21</sup> and they now rank among the best, period, on measures like Advanced Placement exams.<sup>22</sup> The extent to which Florida’s public school districts have become engines of choice themselves is also underappreciated. They account for roughly 700,000 students now enrolled in choice options, more than 40% of the total.<sup>23</sup>

That’s not to suggest, however, that the parents who turned to Plan B when they couldn’t use their choice scholarships are totally satisfied. In our survey, nearly 67% made it clear:

## THEY STILL WANT TO USE THEIR SCHOOL CHOICE SCHOLARSHIPS

Perhaps we are entering the Goldilocks era of public education in Florida. Even without the scholarships, many families found options they deemed satisfactory. But strong majorities also intend to keep seeking the school that’s not just better, but just right.

*By The Numbers*

706

Net gain of new private schools over ten years

1.8M

Students now enrolled in choice options

500,000+

using choice scholarships in 2024-25

# METHODOLOGY

The state of Florida supported more than 300,000 private school choice scholarships during the 2024-25 school year through the FTC and FES-EO Scholarship programs. More specifically, the state awarded 307,866 scholarships through the nonprofit Scholarship Funding Organization Step Up For Students. This figure does not include the Personalized Education Program Scholarship, a subset of the FTC Scholarship used by families who choose to educate their children outside of full-time schools. It also excludes a small number of FTC and FES-EO Scholarships administered by a second Scholarship Funding Organization.

During the 2024-25 school year, about 41,000 students who were awarded FTC or FES-EO Scholarships — about 12% of all awardees — never enrolled in a private school.

We say “about 41,000” because the status of a small percentage of scholarship students can still be in flux late in a school year, as their circumstances change or new information comes to light.

We emailed surveys to the parents of these students, using a total of 32,283 unique email addresses. Parents with multiple children awarded FTC or FES-EO Scholarships received only one survey and were instructed to respond based on their oldest awarded child.

The initial survey invitation was sent January 30, followed by a series of reminder emails before the survey closed February 24. To encourage participation, we offered ten \$100 Amazon gift cards to randomly selected respondents. Spanish-language surveys were sent to 2,232 families who had either applied in Spanish or indicated a preference for Spanish-language communications.

We received 3,586 completed responses. Of those, 847 were excluded from the final dataset. The survey included a question to screen out potential respondents who indicated their children were using the scholarships or had been awarded another type of scholarship. We also removed potential respondents who indicated they lived out of state the previous year, in which case their insights about prior school satisfaction were deemed less relevant.<sup>24</sup> That left a total of 2,739 valid respondents, yielding a response rate of 8.5%. The margin of error for the survey is ±1.87 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. See Table 1.

To assess whether the exclusion criteria introduced bias, we compared the race, income, and new-versus-renewal status of those who were excluded to those who were included in the final analysis. We found no statistically significant differences. The final sample closely mirrors the broader population of non-enrolling scholarship recipients in terms of race, income, and the percentage of new-versus-renewal applicants. A full demographic comparison appears in the next section.



Table 1: Survey Responses

32,283

Total Population

2,739

Sample Respondents

8.48%

Response Rate

91.52

Difference (PP)

1.87%

Margin of Error  
(95% confidence)





# ABOUT THE RESPONDENTS

The parents who responded to the survey are diverse along multiple dimensions. See Table 2.

In terms of race, 39.8% of their children are Hispanic, 30.9% are White, and 23.5% are Black. For the survey population, the corresponding rates are 38.2%, 29.9%, and 25.5%. For the population of those who used the FTC and FES-EO Scholarships, the corresponding rates are 35.9%, 40.2%, and 18.8%. Those who were awarded the scholarships but never used them, and those who responded to the survey, were less likely to be White, and more likely to be Black and Hispanic, than the families who used the scholarships.

In terms of income, 40.4% of the respondents have incomes below 185% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines (the threshold for free- and reduced-price lunch), according to income data the parents self-reported to Step Up For Students during the application process. Meanwhile, 30.2% have incomes between 185% and 400% of the poverty line, 16.0% have incomes above 400% of the poverty line, and 13.4% are unknown. For the survey population, the corresponding rates are 43.9%, 27.3%, 15.2%, and 13.6%. For those who used the scholarships, the corresponding rates are 41.5%, 27.5%, 26.7%, and 4.4%. Those who were awarded the scholarships but never used them, and those who responded to the survey, were less likely to be in the highest income tier, and more likely not to have reported their incomes, than the families who used the scholarships.

The survey asked respondents for their annual household income before taxes. Expressed that way, 14.3% indicated it is below \$25,000; 23.7% said \$25,000 to \$49,999; 17.8% said \$50,000 to \$74,999; and 11.4% said \$75,0000 to \$99,999. Another 23.5% indicated their household income is above \$100,000 a year, while 9.2% preferred not to say.

In terms of formal education background, we asked the respondents about their highest level of education completed. A majority (50.3%) indicated a bachelor’s degree or higher, followed by some college but no degree (14.5%), associate degree (14.3%), high school (12.4%), trade or technical school (5.7%), and less than high school (2.8%).

The survey included both applicants whose children were not using scholarships at the time they applied (new applicants) and those whose children were using them (renewal applicants). Among the respondents, 87.2% were new applicants, and 12.9% were renewal applicants. For the survey population, the corresponding rates were 85.6% and 14.4%.

The respondents’ children were in a variety of school types at the time their parents applied for the scholarships. Zoned or assigned public schools was the single biggest school type (at 36.9%), followed by private schools (25.2%), charter schools (13.3%), open enrollment public schools (5.5%), and home education (4.9%). As we note in a subsequent section, those percentages shifted as a third of the respondents migrated across school types to enroll their children in options besides private schools.

The respondents also indicated a strong desire for the scholarships – and a variety of reasons for seeking them. See Figure 2. Overall, 87.6% said the scholarship was very important to their pursuit of a different learning option for their child. But as we will note throughout this paper, significant differences often emerge when the results are disaggregated by race and income. In this case, Black and Hispanic parents were far more likely to say the scholarship was very important (94.3%, p = 0.0004 and 92.4%, p = 0.0043 , respectively) than White parents (77.6%). Ditto for the lowest-income parents versus the highest-income parents (91.7% to 78.8%, p < 0.001). (For a breakdown to this question by race and income, see Table A1 in the Appendix.)

Not surprisingly, 66.5% of respondents said they applied because they needed help paying for the school they wanted for their child

The other top rationales for seeking the scholarships were also not surprising, given the results of other surveys over many years, locations, and contexts that asked similar questions of choice scholarship parents – and often found similar responses.<sup>25</sup>

Just under half of all respondents (48.7%) wanted more individual attention for their child and/or smaller class sizes. That was followed by stronger academic programs (40.9%), a school that reflected their values (40.1%), and a school that reflected their religious beliefs (29.1%). Concerns about their child’s emotional health (28.3%), physical safety (23.2%), and mental health (21.7%) also ranked high.

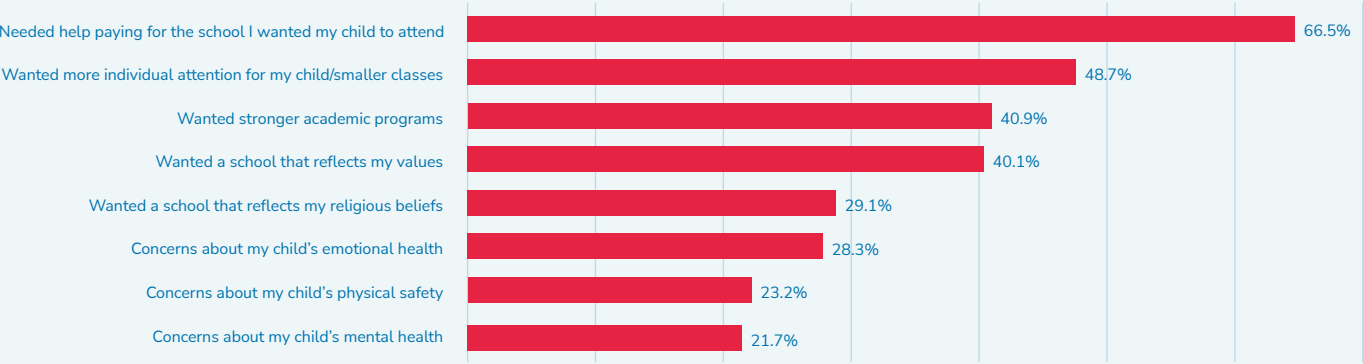
When the results are disaggregated, one motivation stood out with statistically significant differences across both race and income: a desire for more individual attention and smaller class sizes. Black parents were more likely than White parents to cite this reason, with 54.1% of Black parents selecting it compared to 42.4% of White parents (p = 0.0004). Similarly, lower-income parents were more likely than middle-income parents to cite it, with 51.6% of lower-income parents selecting this reason compared to 44.2% of those in the middle-income tier (p = 0.0444).

TABLE 2 SURVEY RESPONDENTS BY SELECTED DEMOGRAPHICS

	Overall	Asian	Black	Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	Hispanic	Multi-Racial	Native American	Unknown	White
<b>Race</b>		2.2	23.5	0.2	39.8	3.2	0.3	0.0	30.9
<b>Student Type</b>									
New	87.2	84.8	82.6	83.3	89.9	97.7	100.0	100.0	86.0
Renewal	12.9	15.3	17.4	16.7	10.1	2.3	0.0	0.0	14.0
<b>Percentage of Poverty</b>									
Less than 185 percent of poverty	40.4	20.3	62.0	66.7	40.2	29.9	62.5	100.0	26.2
185 to 400 percent of poverty	30.2	27.1	24.2	0.0	32.0	27.6	25.0	0.0	33.1
Greater than 400 percent of poverty	16.0	32.2	4.8	16.7	15.3	19.5	0.0	0.0	24.1
Missing income	13.4	20.3	9.0	16.7	12.5	23.0	12.5	0.0	16.6
<b>Annual Salary</b>									
Less than \$25,000	14.3	5.8	20.7	0.0	16.6	18.1	42.9	0.0	6.8
\$25,000 - \$49,999	23.7	7.7	36.0	40.0	25.2	18.1	28.6	0.0	14.3
\$50,000 - \$74,999	17.8	15.4	20.3	0.0	18.8	16.9	0.0	0.0	15.3
\$75,000 - \$99,000	11.4	9.6	8.1	20.0	11.0	16.9	14.3	0.0	13.9
\$100,000 - \$149,999	13.5	21.2	7.2	0.0	11.9	10.8	0.0	0.0	20.2
\$150,00 or more	10.0	19.2	1.4	20.0	8.9	8.4	0.0	100.0	17.2
Prefer not to say	9.2	21.2	6.2	20.0	7.7	10.8	14.3	0.0	12.3
<b>Education</b>									
Less than high school	2.8	1.9	4.5	0.0	2.6	1.2	0.0	0.0	1.9
Graduated high school	12.4	3.9	18.1	0.0	11.6	10.8	20.0	0.0	9.8
Trade/technical school	5.7	0.0	7.1	20.0	5.7	6.0	0.0	0.0	5.1
Some college, no degree	14.5	1.9	17.9	0.0	13.0	14.5	20.0	0.0	14.2
Associate degree	14.3	5.8	16.2	20.0	15.4	14.5	20.0	0.0	12.3
Bachelor's degree	31.1	44.2	22.1	40.0	30.0	34.9	20.0	0.0	37.6
Advanced degree (Master's, Ph.D., M.D.)	19.2	42.3	14.1	20.0	21.7	18.1	20.0	100.0	19.1

These results suggest that while affordability remains a key reason families seek scholarships, academic environment and classroom dynamics also play a central role in how many families evaluate their options.

FIG.2 WHY DID YOU APPLY FOR THE SCHOLARSHIP?



# CHALLENGES WITH AVAILABILITY AND AFFORDABILITY

The biggest reason families didn’t use their scholarships: No availability at the schools they wanted. The second biggest reason: The scholarship amount wasn’t enough.

When asked why they didn't use the scholarships, 34.7% of respondents selected lack of availability from a list with eight other potential responses and the possibility of multiple selections. Meanwhile, about 20% of respondents either said the scholarship amount was not enough; or they had concerns about additional costs beyond tuition and fees; or both. See Figure 3.

Together, those responses suggest that while Florida’s private school sector has grown as choice has expanded, availability and affordability remain an issue for many families.

Affordability is a bigger challenge for some groups than others. Hispanic parents were more likely than White parents to say the scholarship amount wasn’t enough; 21.1% of Hispanic parents selected this reason, compared to 17.4% of White parents (p = 0.043). At the same time, lower-income parents were significantly more likely than higher-income parents to say that the scholarship amount was not enough. Nearly 21.4% of lower-income parents cited this reason, compared to 15.3% of higher-income parents (p = 0.006). Even with scholarship support, some families still felt the cost of private school remained out of reach.

The same pattern held true when it came to concerns about additional costs beyond tuition. About 30.1% of lower-income parents selected this reason, compared to 23.0% of those in the

middle-income tier (p = 0.024). Accessibility also emerges in the second tier of reasons cited by respondents. For example, 9.4% cited lack of transportation and 5.8% said the school was too far. Black and Hispanic parents were more likely than White parents to highlight transportation, 22.7% and 21.7%, respectively, compared to 14.1% of White parents (p = 0.015, 0.007).

## NONE OF THESE CHALLENGES ARE NEW

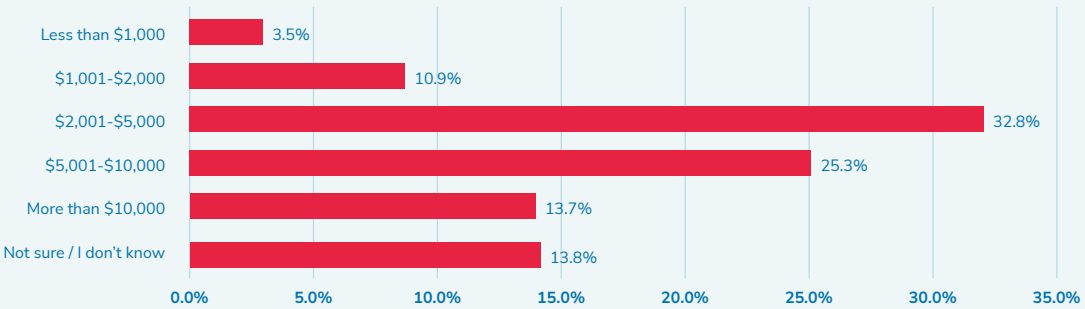
On the availability front, a 2022 survey of Florida private schools by Step Up For Students and EdChoice found the schools could run out of room in three to five years given current rates of scholarship growth.<sup>26</sup> Notably, that survey was conducted before HB 1, the landmark bill signed into law by Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis in 2023 that made every student in the state eligible for a choice scholarship. More recently, Teach Coalition, a research and advocacy group that represents Orthodox Jewish schools, raised concerns about diminishing school capacity in Florida in two separate reports over the past year.<sup>27</sup>

On the transportation front, researchers Lindsey Burke and Jason Bedrick noted that hurdle in their 2018 survey of Florida scholarship parents. At that time, 4% of respondents indicated it was somewhat difficult to find a school, and, among those respondents, 30% pointed to transportation challenges as a primary reason.<sup>28</sup> Florida is now serving three times as many students with its general population scholarship programs as it was when that survey was administered.

Florida policymakers have long recognized that transportation can be a challenge for choice families. For families enrolled in public schools besides their zoned schools, the state provides transportation stipends of \$750 to families who apply.

For the 2024-25 school year, 18,703 households will receive them. No such program currently exists for students in private schools.

FIG.4 DOLLAR AMOUNT NEEDED TO FULLY UTILIZE SCHOLARSHIPS



## SCHOLARSHIP AMOUNTS

As for affordability, some choice advocates have for decades pitched variable scholarship amounts pegged to family income.<sup>29</sup> A handful of states use sliding scales.<sup>30</sup> In Florida, policymakers established higher scholarship amounts for students disadvantaged by disability; those scholarships are worth roughly \$10,000 each. Higher scholarship amounts are not available to students disadvantaged by poverty.

For survey respondents who indicated the private schools they sought were still financially out of reach, we asked how much additional funding they needed “to fully utilize the scholarship.” The biggest block of respondents, 32.8%, said \$2,001-\$5,000, while 25.3% said \$5,001-\$10,000, 13.7% said more than \$10,000, and 14.4% said less than \$2,000. See Figure 4.

According to the Education Data Initiative, average private school tuition in Florida in 2021 was \$10,617.<sup>31</sup>

It is not clear whether rising tuition rates are a factor. Tuition rates for K-12 private schools in Florida have increased in recent years, as they have in many states. A 2025 analysis by the Foundation for Excellence in Education found those increases tied to rising inflation rather than expanding choice.<sup>32</sup> A 2023 analysis by The Heritage Foundation found bigger tuition hikes in states without private school choice programs than in states with them.<sup>33</sup> In Florida, we do not have data to gauge whether affordability is becoming any more or less of a challenge for families using or hoping to use choice scholarships. The value of the state’s general population choice scholarships has long been pegged to a set percentage of the state’s core operational per-pupil funding for students in public schools, and that percentage has increased considerably over time. In 2014-15, the average scholarship amount was \$5,272. In 2024-25, it’s roughly \$8,000.

## A NOTE ABOUT: “NONE OF THESE”

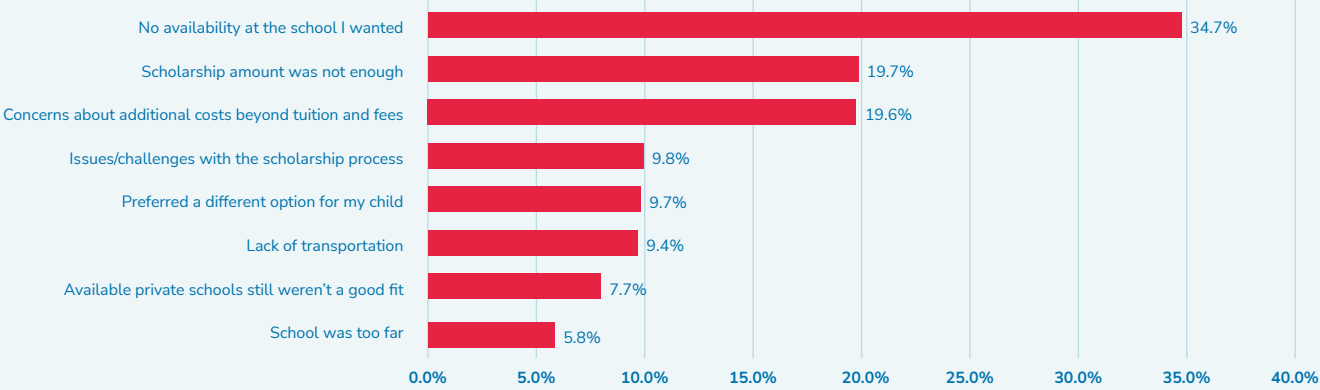
A significant number of respondents also selected “None of these describes my reason to not use the scholarship.” Overall, 747 parents picked that option, making it the second most selected. The vast majority of them also selected one or more other options on the list of provided responses.

When asked on the follow-up question which single factor was most important, 4.2% picked “None of these.” (To see the responses to that question, see Table A3 in the Appendix.)

To dig deeper, we emailed an open-ended, follow-up question to these parents. Many of the write-in responses echoed themes from the original list, like finances or logistics. Others gave one-off explanations. A few said they applied thinking they would use the scholarship for a different school year. But one response showed up more than any other: a number of parents said they didn't use the scholarship because their current or preferred private school didn't accept it. According to the Florida Department of Education's online private school directory, 72% of private schools participate in the FTC and FES-EO programs. That percentage has increased significantly over time (in 2005-06, 43% participated, according to the oldest data available on the FDOE site). But clearly, many schools do not participate, and that is another factor in why some parents do not use their choice scholarships.

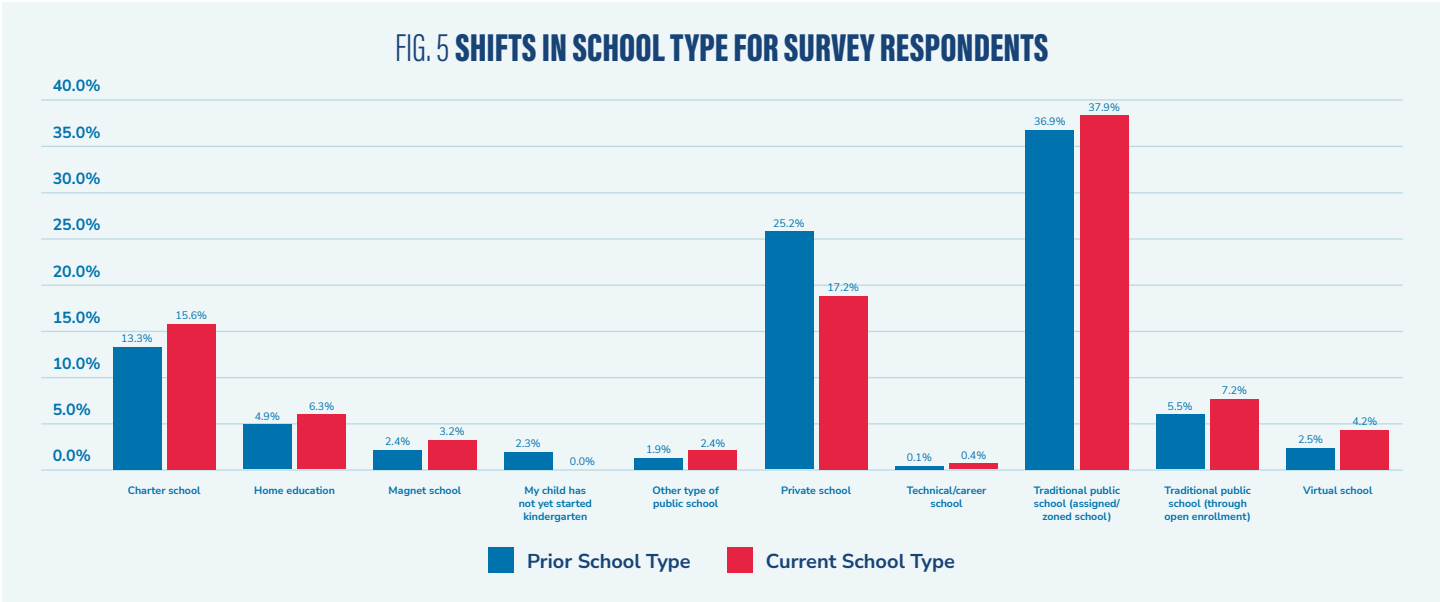


FIG.3 REASONS FOR NOT USING AWARDED SCHOLARSHIPS



Parents who selected “Concerns about additional costs beyond tuition and fees” or “Issues/challenges with the scholarship process” were asked follow-up questions to better understand their reasoning. Responses to those follow-ups are provided in Figure 4 and Table A2 in the Appendix.

# FOR SOME PARENTS, OTHER OPTIONS SUFFICE



Even though these families didn’t end up using the scholarship they were awarded, many still found schooling options they considered workable — or even preferable.

A third of the respondents (36.5%) switched from one type of school to another despite not using the scholarship – for example, from a district school to a charter school, or a magnet to a home school. Those parents did end up making a choice, even if it wasn’t the choice of a private school many of them envisioned.

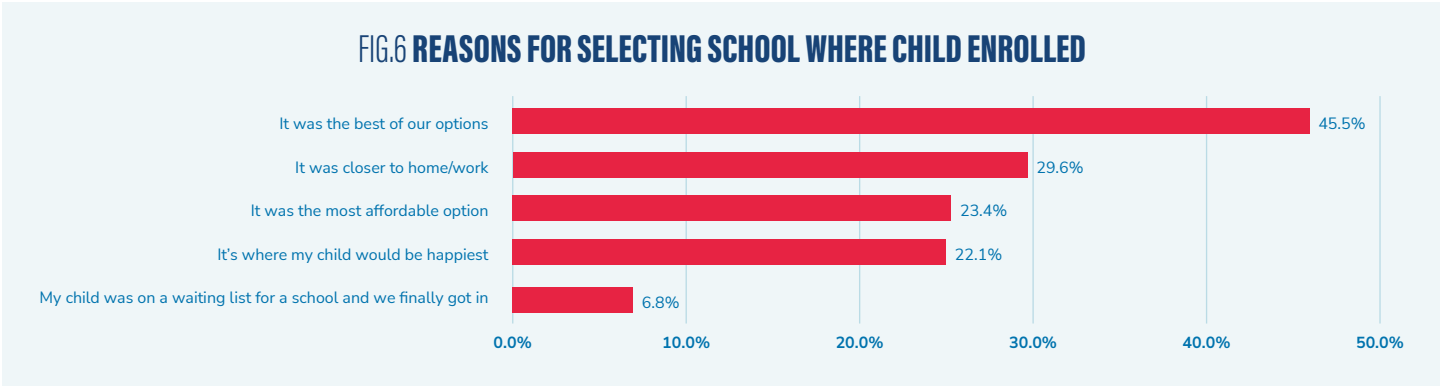
Nearly 40% of respondents had their children enrolled in zoned public schools at the time they applied for the scholarship. But when these parents were asked where they ultimately enrolled their child, common responses included charter schools (22.5%), magnet schools (13.4%), and virtual programs (11.3%).

Ultimately, the respondents’ children ended up enrolled in higher rates in every type of school we listed except private

school, where the percentage enrolled dropped 8 points. The biggest changes were in charter schools (+2.3 percentage points), open enrollment public schools (+1.7 percentage points), and virtual schools (+1.7 percentage points). See Figure 5.

When asked why they chose the school their child ultimately enrolled in, nearly half of parents — 45.5% — said it was simply the best option available to them. Others pointed to proximity, with 29.6% saying the school was closer to home or work. Affordability was also a factor, with 23.4% citing the school as the most affordable option. See Figure 6.

Of the respondents who said they selected the school because it was the best of their options, 30.5% cited stronger academic programs, 25.5% cited a physically safer environment, and 25.2% cited more individual attention as the more specific reason. (See Table A4 in the Appendix.)



These responses highlight the practical and personal considerations that shaped families’ decisions — considerations that go beyond finances alone.

We also asked parents how satisfied they were with their child’s school at two key points in the process:

- With the school their child was enrolled in at the time they applied for the scholarship.
- With the school their child ultimately enrolled in without the scholarship.

Both questions used a Likert scale, though the response options differed slightly in wording. The first question included: very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, neither satisfied or dissatisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, and very dissatisfied. The second listed: very satisfied, satisfied, neutral, dissatisfied, and very dissatisfied. While the difference in language was unintentional, we do not believe it meaningfully altered how parents interpreted or answered the questions. However, to account for these differences and allow for a valid comparison, we grouped the responses into three broader categories: **satisfied**, **neutral**, and **dissatisfied**.

- “Very satisfied” and “somewhat satisfied” (or “satisfied”) were grouped into a single **satisfied** category.
- “Somewhat dissatisfied” and “very dissatisfied” (or simply “dissatisfied”) were grouped into **dissatisfied**.
- “Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied” and “neutral” responses were grouped into the **neutral** category.

TABLE 3 SHIFT IN SCHOOL SATISFACTION AT BEGINNING AND END OF PROCESS

Satisfaction Level	At Time of Application	At the Selected School
Satisfied	55.0%	51.6%
Dissatisfied	30.2%	17.6%
Neutral	10.6%	25.6%

This approach allowed us to compare satisfaction levels before and after school changes in a way that is consistent and interpretable, despite the slight variation in wording.

As a whole, scholarship applicants were largely satisfied with their child’s prior public school. More than 60% were already in something other than their zoned schools. And at the time they applied for the scholarship, more indicated they were satisfied (55.0%) than dissatisfied (30.2%). Drew Catt and Evan Rhinesmith observed a similar dynamic in their 2016 survey of choice scholarship parents in Indiana. They offered that “it would appear the best interpretation of these results is that while many parents were happy with their previous schools, they would prefer to enroll their children in a school that offered characteristics more in line with their own preferences.”<sup>34</sup>

It’s also worth noting that the parents were being asked to reflect on two different points in their school selection journey. Because those reflections are shaped by what they’ve experienced since, it’s possible their current experience influenced how they recalled or re-evaluated the past — a well-documented phenomenon known as response shift bias.<sup>35</sup>

In that context, the direction of change — particularly the statistically significant drop in dissatisfaction — still offers a useful look at how parents’ satisfaction evolved. While overall satisfaction remained relatively steady, the percentage of dissatisfied parents dropped from 30.2% to 17.6% (p < 0.001).

These shifts may seem counterintuitive at first. After all, 87.6% of parents said the scholarship was very important to them — and ultimately, they weren’t able to use it. But satisfaction is shaped by more than access to a scholarship. It appears many parents were able to find other workable options in Florida’s broad education landscape, whether through district schools, charter schools, or other alternatives.

It’s also possible that some parents felt better about their decisions, even if they did not switch schools, because they had the agency to make a choice. According to self-determination theory, autonomy is a basic psychological need, and when people feel they have agency in important decisions, they tend to report higher levels of satisfaction and well-being.<sup>36</sup> Parents who selected a school they felt was right for their child — even without using a scholarship — may have felt more ownership over the decision and, in turn, more satisfaction with the outcome.

In their evaluation of the Washington D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program, a team of University of Arkansas researchers found parents expressed high levels of satisfaction with the program, even though empirical evidence of better academic outcomes was limited. This tended to be true even with parents who were so frustrated with some schools that they withdrew from the program. “First and foremost,” the researchers wrote, “the parents appreciated the fact that they made the choice.”<sup>37</sup> Perhaps a similar dynamic is at play with the respondents to our survey, given the multiple options now available to many families with Florida’s choice-rich education system.



# THEY STILL WANT TO USE THEIR SCHOLARSHIPS

TABLE 4 PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO WILL RE-APPLY FOR SCHOLARSHIPS

	Yes (%)	Statistically Significant? <sup>1</sup>
All Respondents	66.7	—
Race		
Black	72.4	Yes; p = 0.0024
Hispanic	73.4	Yes; p = 0.00006
White	64.7	—
Income		
Lower Income	75.0	Yes (vs. Middle); p = 0.0023
Middle Income	66.3	—
Higher Income	70.8	—

Some parents found other options. More parents felt more rather than less satisfied about their child’s schooling situation at the end of the process.

But the overwhelming majority still planned to apply for the scholarships again. See Table 4.

Overall, 66.7% of the respondents said they would apply again, 16.6% were undecided, and 11.6% said they would not (5.1% did not answer).

Black and Hispanic parents were more likely than White parents to say they would apply again. Ditto for low-income parents over middle-income parents. While interest in the scholarship remains strong across all income groups, it may be especially urgent among families who face the steepest financial barriers to accessing alternative schooling options.

A strong majority of parents who switched school type also said they would apply again (63.0%), including 55.3% of those who said they were satisfied or very satisfied with their child’s school.



# THE SUNSHINE STATE HIT THE 500,000 MARK THIS YEAR WITH STUDENTS USING CHOICE SCHOLARSHIPS

As education choice accelerates across America, no state offers better insight into the opportunities and challenges ahead than Florida. The Sunshine State hit the 500,000 mark this year with students using choice scholarships. It also saw tens of thousands of families who were awarded scholarships not use them. This survey is believed to be the first to focus on families who declined to use choice scholarships.

Collectively, the respondents didn’t get exactly what they wanted, for now. But thanks to other options in Florida’s choice-rich education landscape, their Plan B, for now, isn’t bad. “For now” is an important modifier, because the majority of respondents — even those who ended up more satisfied — plan on applying for the scholarship again.

Policymakers can take steps to ensure more families access the private schools they want rather than going with Plan B. At the same time, the responses from the surveyed parents suggest many of them appreciate those other options — and that many of those options do offer features they want for their children. Policy solutions that center Florida families would aim to strengthen all the learning options they value.

AMONG THE POSSIBILITIES:

- Helping private schools and other education providers better navigate zoning and building codes that are increasingly out of sorts with today’s more diverse and dynamic education system. This is especially needed for the bespoke “microschools,” tutoring centers, and other non-traditional models that are proliferating in response to demand.<sup>38</sup>
- Incidenting the repurposing of unused and underused public school facilities so both districts and alternative providers can benefit.<sup>39</sup> In the past year, 12 Florida districts have registered to become education savings account providers, so they can serve ESA families who want a la carte services like individual classes.<sup>40</sup> That offers hope that similar partnerships are possible with facilities.

- Adjusting scholarship values so low-income families have more power to access the schools they want – and more schools emerge to serve them. A prime opportunity might arise if, as many expect, federal officials convert Title I funds into block grants that would give states more flexibility in how best to help low-income students.
- Expanding the state’s \$750 transportation stipend – which is available to families whose children attend K-8 public schools of choice – to other choice parents with demonstrable need.
- Creating a state-funded grants program to encourage the creation of alternative transportation modes that could benefit a wide array of choice families and providers, including district schools and the families who prefer them. The Arizona Transportation Modernization Grants Program offers a good model.

The transformation of public education in Florida is unfolding on a scale unmatched anywhere else in America. Every day, more families use the freedom and flexibility they find with choice scholarships, and more schools and other providers emerge to serve them.

For decades, Florida policymakers have put families first as they crafted education programs that were ever more responsive to their needs. As the transformation rolls into a new, critical phase, thousands of parents who wanted to use the scholarships but couldn’t offer useful insights. How policymakers respond will be important not only to families in Florida. Key audiences across America are watching Florida to see where the expansion of education choice will take them, too.

*Policymakers can take steps to ensure more families access the private schools they want rather than going with Plan B.*

# FOR THIS FAMILY, PRIVATE SCHOOL STILL WASN'T AFFORDABLE

**B**efore the bullying began, Carol Giovanni's daughter was an honor roll student at a public middle school in the Tampa Bay area. Things went downhill after a clique of girls started harassing her. And when she learned the girls would be joining her at the same zoned high school, she crumbled.

"She was crying every day," said Giovanni, whose real name is not being used to protect the identify of her and her daughter. "She was begging me not to send her."

Last summer, Giovanni secured a school choice scholarship and began contacting nearby private schools. Initially, none of the three she thought would be a good fit had any available seats. Three weeks into the school year, a seat opened at one of them. But when Giovanni tallied all the fees and expenses, she realized she'd still need a couple thousand dollars a year beyond the scholarship.

She didn't have it. As the widow of a service member, she receives modest survivor benefits, and her most recent jobs include working at a bakery and a pizza place.

"It was adding up to, 'I can't afford this,'" Giovanni said.



At the high school, things turned out worse than Giovanni feared. During the first few weeks, she received several messages about lockdowns, followed by frantic texts from her already-anxious daughter. "I'm like, I'm getting her out of here," she said.

A guidance counselor suggested Giovanni homeschool and use Florida Virtual School for core classes. So she did. She didn't know about the state's Personalized Education Program Scholarship, which could help her defray costs and access other providers.

Emotionally, Giovanni said, things are better for her daughter. Academically, not so much. "Her grades are slipping," she said. "It's difficult for me, trying to keep her on track."

For this fall, Giovanni applied to get her daughter into a magnet school. She still thinks a private school would be best, and she applied for a choice scholarship for the 2025-26 school year. But she doesn't have much hope of using it.

"HER GRADES ARE SLIPPING. [...] IT'S DIFFICULT FOR ME, TRYING TO KEEP HER ON TRACK."

# FOR THIS FAMILY, THE CHOICE SCHOLARSHIP WAS PLAN B

**F**or Eulalia Gutierrez, the problems at her daughter's zoned school in South Florida had mounted for months. Elliana's fourth-grade teacher didn't communicate well. She was curt. And Elliana, previously an A student, began to see C's and even a D on her report card.

Other issues festered. Sometimes, the teacher's dresses were too short for Gutierrez's taste. Gutierrez complained to the front office, but "they just shrugged."

The final straw came with the after-school program. Another girl kept blaming Elliana for inappropriate text messages the girl herself was sending. And all Gutierrez heard about when she picked her daughter up was how much the kids were cursing. Again, Gutierrez complained. Again, shrug.

AT THAT POINT, SHE SAID, "I JUST KNEW I HAD TO REMOVE HER FROM THAT NEGATIVITY."

Gutierrez applied to a nearby charter school and for a private school choice scholarship. Neighbors raved about the charter school, but Gutierrez was sure it would have a waiting list. So the scholarship, she said, "was Plan B."

Gutierrez grew up in a tough part of the Bronx before moving to Florida in the 1990s. She "had a hard time" at her own zoned school and didn't want history to repeat with her own children.

She is grateful parents in Florida have options. When one of her older daughters struggled with a learning disability, Gutierrez used a choice scholarship to send her to a private school. Her daughter quickly got on track.

This time, Gutierrez, a dental assistant, decided not to use the scholarship, because the charter school had room. Now Elliana is happy again. Her grades are good again. And Gutierrez gets frequent messages from Elliana's teachers about her progress.

Elliana is "kind, thoughtful, and sweet," said one of the messages, which Gutierrez read out loud. "I am so lucky to have her as a student."

Gutierrez saw no need to apply for a scholarship again this year. The charter school goes through grade 12, so Elliana may stay there until she graduates.

If she ever needs options again, though, Gutierrez knows she has them.





# FOR THIS FAMILY, A CHARTER SCHOOL IS THE BEST OPTION ... FOR NOW



**W**hen Krystal Steele and her family moved to Polk County two years ago, she enrolled her oldest daughter into the assigned district school. Her teacher talked a lot, and his classroom seemed promising – until her daughter’s grades took a dive.

In trying to figure out what was behind the drop to Cs and Ds, Steele had her daughter bring home the tablet she used to do assignments in class. That solved the mystery.

“SHE WENT HALF OF THE YEAR NEGLECTING TO DO HER ONLINE WORK, AND HE (THE TEACHER) DIDN’T TELL ME ABOUT IT AT ALL,” STEELE SAID. “HAD I KNOWN, I COULD HAVE CORRECTED IT.”



Steele began looking for other schools, both for her oldest, then in third grade, and another daughter entering kindergarten. She applied for state choice scholarships, in case the best option turned out to be a private school.

She and her family were most attracted to a private school that aligned with their Christian faith. But it had no open seats. “We thought this area would be quiet. But it’s growing fast,” she said. “All the good schools are full.”

Steele got her daughters on several waiting lists for both charter schools and private schools. In the end, they got into a charter school.

Academically, she said, the new school was better than the zoned school. Students are interacting more with teachers and less with tablets. Her oldest is getting better grades.

Financially, though, costs are adding up, even though the school is tuition-free. Steele and her husband, a property maintenance director, welcomed a third daughter this year and are feeling the pinch of \$700 for uniforms and \$250 per child per year for items on the supply list.

They recently decided to try to buy a home in nearby Lakeland, which means searching for a good school all over again.

The hope is still for a Christian school, so they’ll be applying for the state scholarships again too.

# FOR THIS FAMILY, ONE OPTION DIDN’T WORK, BUT ANOTHER ONE DID

**A**manda and Ryan Ritchey thought the public school of choice they found for their daughter near their Sarasota home was excellent. But when their now-9-year-old was assaulted by another student in April 2024, everything changed.

They didn’t want to keep their daughter in the same school, so they applied for and were awarded a private school choice scholarship. But their daughter, who was in therapy because of the incident, was not comfortable returning to a traditional school, public or private.

So the Ritcheys opted for another choice entirely that turned out to be perfect for them: homeschooling.

“THIS IS THE BEST DECISION OF OUR LIVES,” AMANDA SAID. “I COULDN’T IMAGINE OUR LIFE ANY OTHER WAY.”

Homeschooling, though, would not be an easy chore.

Amanda, who works as a waitress, adjusted her schedule to work afternoons and evenings. Ryan, the general manager of an auto parts store, would take over when he came home from work.

Still, the Ritcheys had to learn how to teach. Thankfully, Ryan said, there are plenty of helpful sources and YouTube videos available. They use Time4Learning, a preK-12 homeschool curriculum that they can tailor to their daughter’s interests.



“I’m so excited for the future with this.”

That would be a heavy dose of science. Their daughter, who will soon turn 10, loves biology and anything to do with the environment.

Amanda recently applied for Florida’s Personalized Education Program Scholarship, which is designed for families that don’t enroll their children in public or private schools full time. That will defray the cost of educating their children at home, since they also have a son who is almost old enough for preschool.

Meanwhile, Amanda said, her daughter is thriving.

“It’s been a whole lifestyle change for us, but it’s really been for the best,” she said. “I’m so excited for the future with this.”







ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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

**Ron Matus** is the director, research and special projects, at Step Up For Students, and a former longtime newspaper reporter.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A project like this is not possible without the entire talented team at Step Up For Students. Administering Florida’s education choice scholarship programs is critical, historic, trailblazing work. The authors would like to give special thanks to Jillian Metz, for her constant support and uncanny unflappability; Jaclyn Kilpatrick, for sweating every detail of the design and presentation; Brian Baggett, for his expertise in responding to vital data requests; Amanda Lopez, for her diligence and care with survey administration; Patrick Gibbons, for so often having updated data at his fingertips; Matthew Ladner, for his wise counsel and deep knowledge of all things choice; Roger Mooney and Lisa Buie, for bringing their reporting and storytelling chops; and to the leadership at Step Up, for valuing projects like this. We would also like to give extra thanks to the thousands of parents who went out of their way to respond to our survey. Their insights can help all of us make a good thing even better.



*A project like this is not possible without the entire talented team at Step Up For Students*



# ADDITIONAL TABLES



Thank you! Your continued support means everything to us!  
- The SUFS Team

TABLE A1 IMPORTANCE OF SCHOLARSHIP IN DECISION-MAKING, BY RACE AND INCOME

	Very Important	Moderately Important	Slightly Important	Not important	Total
Overall	2398	232	60	47	2737
Race					
Asian	48	*	*	*	59
Black	607	22	*	*	644
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	*	*	*	*	*
Hispanic	1006	63	*	*	1089
Mult-Racial	68	10	6	3	87
Native American	*	*	*	*	*
Unknown	*	*	*	*	*
White	654	129	34	26	843
Percentage Of Poverty					
Less than 185%	1013	69	13	10	1105
185% to 400%	734	62	19	11	826
400% or above	346	60	18	15	439
Missing Income	305	41	10	11	367

The specific question: “How important was the scholarship to you in your decision to pursue a different educational option for your child?”

TABLE A2 ISSUES OR CHALLENGES WITH THE SCHOLARSHIP PROCESS

	Number	Percentage
I felt there were too many rules or requirements for participating in the scholarship program	42	15.6
The EMA system was confusing and difficult to use	95	35.3
The school enrollment process was too complicated	46	17.1
Communication/email was confusing or unclear	75	27.9
My child's school had difficulty with Step Up's processes	61	22.7
I was concerned about tuition payments or reimbursements arriving on time	62	23
None of these describe my situation	82	30.5
	269	

The specific question: “Which of the following describes your issues or challenges with the scholarship process? Please select all that apply.” Respondents were directed to this question if they selected “issues/challenges with the scholarship process” on the prior question about reasons for not using the scholarship.

TABLE A3 MOST IMPORTANT REASON FOR DECIDING NOT TO USE THE SCHOLARSHIP

	Number	Percentage
No availability at the school I wanted	664	34.7%
Scholarship amount was not enough	407	21.3%
Concerns about additional costs beyond tuition and fees	254	13.3%
Issues/challenges with the scholarship process	161	8.4%
Preferred a different option for my child	149	7.8%
None of these describes my reason to not use the scholarship	80	4.2%
Available private schools still weren't a good fit	76	4.0%
Lack of transportation	69	3.6%
School was too far	53	2.8%
	1913	

The specific question: “If you selected more than one reason (to the prior question), which one was the most important factor in your decision not to use the scholarship?”

TABLE A4 REASONS WHY THE SELECTED SCHOOL WAS THE BEST OPTION

	Number	Percentage
It was the most practical option	395	32.2%
It had stronger academic programs	380	31.0%
I believed my child would be physically safer	318	25.9%
It had more individual attention for my child/smaller class sizes	314	25.6%
I believed my child would be emotionally safer	300	24.4%
It better reflected my values	281	22.9%
I believed my child would be mentally safer	274	22.3%
It was just easier to keep my child at the same school	248	20.2%
None of these describes my reason for choosing the school	204	16.6%
It better reflected my religious beliefs	191	15.6%
It had more resources for my child's unique needs	188	15.3%
It had more sports or extracurricular activities	134	10.9%
It better reflected my culture	107	8.7%

The specific question: “Why was the school the best of your options? (check all that apply)”

ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Executive Office of the Governor, “Governor Ron DeSantis Announces School Choice Success,” January 10, 2025, <https://www.flgov.com/eog/news/press/2025/governor-ron-desantis-announces-school-choice-success>

<sup>2</sup>Patrick R. Gibbons, “Florida’s education evolution now has more than 50% of students in school choice options,” Next Steps (blog), June 5, 2025, <https://nextstepsblog.org/2025/06/floridas-education-evolution-now-has-more-than-50-of-students-in-school-choice-options/>

<sup>3</sup>In the 2022-23 school year, 981,723 Florida students were enrolled in private schools, charter schools, and home education, according to data available on the Florida Department of Education website and compiled by the authors. It’s highly likely that Florida surpassed 1 million students in non-district options in 2023-24, but the official 2023-24 enrollment numbers for private schools and home education were not available at the time of this writing.

<sup>4</sup>According to Step Up For Students figures, 181,498 students used FTC and FES-EO Scholarships in 2022-23, and 307,609 used them as of February 2025. Those figures do not include a small number of scholarships administered by another state-approved Scholarship Funding Organization.

<sup>5</sup>As an example of participant effects, state-hired researchers have, since the 2006-07 school year, conducted annual learning gains analyses on the results of the norm-referenced math and reading tests that Florida Tax Credit Scholarship students are required by law to take. Those analyses have consistently found: 1) the students using the scholarship are, on average, the lowest performing students in their prior public schools, and 2) that now, in the private schools their parents chose, they are making the same annual learning gains of students of all income levels nationally. The reports can be found here: <https://www.fldoe.org/schools/school-choice/facts-figures.shtml>

<sup>6</sup>As an example of competitive effects, researchers David N. Figlio, Cassandra M. D. Hart, and Krzysztof Karbownik found that as the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship expanded, students in the high-poverty schools most impacted by the competition saw higher test scores, lower absenteeism, and fewer suspensions. David N. Figlio, Cassandra M. D. Hart, and Krzysztof Karbownik, “Effects of Maturing Private School Choice Programs on Public School Students,” *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy* 15, 4 (November 2023): 255-294, <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/pol.20210710>

<sup>7</sup>A 2019 Urban Institute study found low-income students using the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship were up to 43% more likely to attend four-year colleges than like students in public schools, and up to 20% more likely to earn bachelor’s degrees. Matthew Chingos, Tomás Monarrez, Daniel Kuehn, “The Effects of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program on College Enrollment and Graduation: An Update,” February 4, 2019, <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/effects-florida-tax-credit-scholarship-program-college-enrollment-and-graduation>

<sup>8</sup>The private school numbers can be found in the Florida Department of Education’s annual private school reports here: <https://www.fldoe.org/schools/school-choice/private-schools/annual-reports.shtml>

<sup>9</sup>According to Florida Department of Education data, there were a total of 3,088,386 students in Florida’s public, private, and home schools in 2012-13, and 3,469,863 in 2022-23.

<sup>10</sup>Lauren May, Mary Camp, Patrick Gibbons, and Ron Matus, “Why Catholic Schools in Florida Are Growing: 5 Things to Know” (update brief), Next Steps (blog), April 2024, <https://nextstepsblog.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/SUFS-Expanded-White-Paper-Catholic-Schools-In-Florida-UPDATED.pdf>

<sup>11</sup>Gabriel Aaronson and Tzvi Kiwala, “Enrollment Trends in Florida Jewish Schools, 2007-08 to 2022-23,” August 15, 2024, <https://teachcoalition.org/research/enrollment-trends-in-florida-jewish-schools-2007-08-to-2022-23/>

<sup>12</sup>Denisha Allen and Ron Matus, “Controlling the Narrative: Parental Choice, Black Empowerment & Lessons from Florida” (update brief), Next Steps (blog), March 2025, <https://nextstepsblog.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Controlling-The-Narrative-V8.pdf>

<sup>13</sup>Ron Matus, “The school these parents wanted didn’t exist, so with school choice, they created it,” Next Steps (blog), October 2, 2023, <https://nextstepsblog.org/2023/10/the-school-these-parents-wanted-didnt-exist-so-with-school-choice-they-created-it/>

<sup>14</sup>Ron Matus, “Little school, big idea,” Next Steps (blog), November 16, 2021, <https://nextstepsblog.org/2021/11/little-school-big-idea/>

<sup>15</sup>Ron Matus, “The nature school that’s growing environmental leaders,” Next Steps (blog), February 28, 2025, <https://nextstepsblog.org/2025/02/the-nature-school-thats-growing-environmental-leaders/>

<sup>16</sup>Ron Matus and Dava Hankerson Fedrick, “Rerouting the Myths of Rural Education Choice,” Next Steps (blog), November 29, 2022, <https://nextstepsblog.org/2022/11/special-report-separating-fact-from-fiction-about-rural-school-choice/>

<sup>17</sup>The exact amounts depend on county and grade level: [FTC-FES-EO-PEP-Award-Amounts.pdf](#)

<sup>18</sup>That’s the total number using the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship and the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Educational Options. The latter was created in 2019, so the 2012-13 number reflects the FTC Scholarship alone.

<sup>19</sup>The Family Empowerment Scholarship for Students with Unique Abilities was Florida’s first education savings account program. Preliminary numbers from Step Up For Students for the 2024-25 school year show it is serving more than 122,000 students, including more than 63,000 served by private schools.

<sup>20</sup>The number of Florida students enrolled in private schools rose from 320,423 in 2012-13 to 445,067 in 2022-23, according to the most recent publicly available data from the Florida Department of Education. The state’s annual private school reports can be found here: <https://www.fldoe.org/schools/school-choice/private-schools/annual-reports.shtml>

<sup>21</sup>In the mid to late 1990s, Florida ranked in the bottom third of states on all four of the core NAEP math and reading tests, according to Urban Institute’s America’s Gradebook, which adjusts for demographics. By 2019, according to that measure, Florida ranked No. 1, No. 1, No. 3, and No. 8 on those tests. On the 2024 NAEP, Florida’s scores and rankings dipped, dropping to No. 2, No. 3, No. 22, and No. 22, according to the adjusted results.

<sup>22</sup>Florida ranks No. 7 among states in the percentage of graduating seniors who have passed AP exams, according to the most recent data from the College Board. <https://reports.collegeboard.org/ap-program-results/class-of-2024>

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<sup>23</sup><https://nextstepsblog.org/2024/02/florida-sets-new-education-choice-records-as-1-7-million-students-choose/>

<sup>24</sup>Of the 847 respondents who were excluded, 444 were excluded because they indicated they did not fit the description of the targeted population and 263 were excluded because they lived out of state at the time they applied for the scholarship. The remaining 140 were excluded because they exited the survey after the first page.

<sup>25</sup>In 2016, Andrew D. Catt and Evan Rhinesmith surveyed families participating in Indiana’s private school choice programs and asked them to list the most important factors for choosing their current schools. The top reason: religious environment/instruction (39%), followed by better academics (20%) and morals/character/values instruction (19%). Andrew D. Catt and Evan Rhinesmith, “Why Parents Choose: A Survey of Private School and School Choice Parents in Indiana,” June 2016, <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Why-Parents-Choose-A-Survey-of-Private-School-and-School-Choice-Parents-in-Indiana-by-Andrew-D.-Catt-and-Evan-Rhinesmith.pdf>. In 2018, Lindsey Burke and Jason Bedrick surveyed more than 14,000 parents participating in the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program and asked them to list the top three reasons they chose their child’s private school. Two factors were chosen by a majority of parents – religious environment/instruction (66%) and morals/character/value instruction (52%) – followed by safe environment (36%), academic reputation (34%), and small classes (31%). Jason Bedrick and Lindsey Burke, “Surveying Florida Scholarship Families: Experiences and Satisfaction with Florida’s Tax-Credit Scholarship Program,” October 2018, <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/2018-10-Surveying-Florida-Scholarship-Families-byJason-Bedrick-and-Lindsey-Burke.pdf>. In 2021, EdChoice researchers Andrew D. Catt and John M. Kristof asked a small group of choice scholarship parents participating in multiple programs in Ohio to identify the school characteristics that were most important to them in school selection. For one group of private school choice parents, academics was the highest rated factor (at 20%), while for another group there was a three-way tie between academics, morals/character/values instruction, and discipline (all at 15%). Andrew D. Catt and John M. Kristof, “Families’ Schooling Experiences in Ohio,” October 2021, <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/10-2021-Ohio-K-12-School-Choice-Survey-updated-logo.pdf>

<sup>26</sup>Patrick R. Gibbons, “Step Up For Students survey shows Florida private schools may soon be full,” Next Steps (blog), October 18, 2022, <https://nextstepsblog.org/2022/10/step-up-for-students-survey-shows-floridas-private-schools-may-soon-be-full/>

<sup>27</sup>Aaronson and Kiwala, “Enrollment Trends in Florida Jewish Schools, 2007-08 to 2022-23.” Teach Coalition and Teach Florida, “Local Zoning Barriers to Opening Nonpublic Schools In Florida,” January 2025, [Florida-Zoning-Barriers-to-Entry-Report-Dec-2024\\_1.13-1.pdf](#)

<sup>28</sup>Bedrick and Burke, p. 22.

<sup>29</sup>Ron Matus, “A school choice manifesto, from the left,” Next Steps (blog), September 8, 2015, <https://nextstepsblog.org/2015/09/from-1968-a-school-choice-manifesto-from-the-left/>

<sup>30</sup>In Ohio, for example, the amount of the Educational Choice Scholarship hinges on family income. Students in families with household incomes below 450% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines get the full amount, while students in families with incomes above that threshold receive gradually smaller amounts as income levels rise. In Oklahoma, the Parental Choice Tax Credit is also tiered based on income, with families with annual household incomes below \$75,000 receiving a maximum credit of \$7,500 per child, families with annual household incomes above \$275,000 receiving a maximum of \$5,000 per child, and three tiers in between. <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/2025-ABCs-of-School-Choice.pdf>

<sup>31</sup><https://educationdata.org/average-cost-of-private-school#florida>. The same source puts average annual per-pupil spending in Florida public schools at \$12,415.

<sup>32</sup>Abby Burrola, Ben DeGrow, Kathy Hodges, Jean Morrow, “Debunking the Myth: School Choice is Not Driving Private School Tuition Increases in Florida,” February 20, 2025, <https://excelined.org/2025/02/20/debunking-the-myth-school-choice-is-not-driving-private-school-tuition-increases-in-florida/>

<sup>33</sup>Jason Bedrick, Jay Greene, and Lindsey Burke, “Does School Choice Affect Private School Tuition?” August 31,2023, <https://www.heritage.org/education/report/does-school-choice-affect-private-school-tuition>

<sup>34</sup>Catt and Rhinesmith, p. 23.

<sup>35</sup>Jonathan Drennan and Abbey Hyde, “Controlling Response Shift Bias: The Use of the Retrospective Pre-Test Design in the Evaluation of a Master’s Programme,” *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 33, no. 6 (2008): 699–709, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602930701773026>

<sup>36</sup>Edward L. Deci & Richard M. Ryan, “The ‘What’ and ‘Why’ of Goal Pursuits: Human Needs and the Self-Determination of Behavior,” *Psychological Inquiry* 11, no. 4 (2000): 227-268, [https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PL1104\\_01](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PL1104_01)

<sup>37</sup>Thomas Stewart, Patrick Wolf, Stephen Q. Cornman, Kenann McKenzie-Thompson, and Jonathan Butcher, “Family Reflections on the District of Columbia Opportunity Scholarship Program,” University of Arkansas School Choice Demonstration Project, Final Summary Report, January 2009, p. 32, [https://bpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/wordpressua.uark.edu/dist/9/544/files/2018/10/Family\\_Reflections\\_DCOSP\\_2009\\_Final-11hcjao.pdf](https://bpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/wordpressua.uark.edu/dist/9/544/files/2018/10/Family_Reflections_DCOSP_2009_Final-11hcjao.pdf)

<sup>38</sup>For one compelling example: Michael McShane, “Outdated Fire Regulations Have Kept This School Stuck at Five Students,” *Forbes*, February 26, 2025, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mikemcshane/2025/02/26/outdated-fire-regulations-have-kept-this-school-stuck-at-five-students/>

<sup>39</sup>Good summary of the case here: William Mattox, “Turning schools into airport terminals (sort of),” *Florida Politics*, April 3, 2025, <https://floridapolitics.com/archives/7730247-william-mattox-turning-schools-into-airport-terminals-sort-of/>

<sup>40</sup>For one example of what this looks like, see: <https://nextstepsblog.org/2023/10/a-sweet-example-of-education-unbundling/>





P.O. Box 54429  
Jacksonville, FL 32245

(877) 735-7837

[StepUpForStudents.org](http://StepUpForStudents.org)