



CATHOLIC SCHOOL UPDATE BRIEF 2026



Florida Catholic Conference
& Step Up For Students

Takeaways

Continuing growth. Catholic school enrollment in Florida rose for a fifth straight year. Over the past decade, Catholic school enrollment in Florida is up 12.0%, while it's down nationally 12.6%.

Special needs surge. A big factor in Florida's growth is a steep rise in students using special needs scholarships in Catholic schools. The number has tripled over the past five years, to 13,482 this year.

More states to watch. Fueled by expansive school choice programs, other states are beginning to see Catholic schools grow again, too. Among the Top 10 states in Catholic school enrollment, Indiana is now the second state to show a net gain over the past decade, driven by the biggest one-year jump in enrollment of any state this year.

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Introduction

The latest Catholic school enrollment data from the Florida Catholic Conference and the National Catholic Educational Association is more proof that good things happen in threes:

- 1) Catholic school enrollment in Florida is up again
- 2) a big reason is a steep – and encouraging – rise in students with special needs, and
- 3) Florida is no longer the only state deserving of a bigger spotlight

In fact, Florida is no longer the only state in the Top 10 states for Catholic school enrollment to show a net gain over the past decade.

This year it's joined by Indiana. The Hoosier State is now in the plus column thanks to this year's jump of nearly 4,000 students. (See Figure 1). (Indiana, by the way, replaced Missouri in the Top 10. Missouri's enrollment has been relatively stable for the past five years, but it dipped just enough for Indiana to pull ahead.)

Figure 1. Top 10 States for Catholic School Enrollment

State	2015-16	2025-26	Change	%Change
California	210,971	179,495	-31,476	-14.9%
Ohio	129,349	123,313	-6,036	-4.7%
New York	170,717	116,506	-54,211	-31.8%
Illinois	140,285	110,762	-29,523	-21.0%
Pennsylvania	131,018	99,692	-31,326	-23.9%
Florida	84,084	94,180	10,096	12.0%
Louisiana	78,540	69,735	-8,805	-11.2%
Texas	77,188	64,355	-12,833	-16.6%
New Jersey	80,303	57,204	-23,099	-28.8%
Indiana	55,908	56,723	815	1.5%
U.S.	1,915,836	1,674,907	-240,929	-12.6%

Source: National Catholic Educational Association

As you'll see in the Appendix, no state had a bigger one-year increase than Indiana. Plenty of others, though, are showing significant growth, including Ohio, Iowa, and New Hampshire, all states with choice programs that encompass universal eligibility.

Still, it's Florida that continues to show what's possible when school choice is the new normal.

The Sunshine State has arguably the most robust choice programs in America¹ – and, in turn, the country's most diverse and dynamic education system.

[Half of Florida's students](#) are now enrolled in something other than their zoned neighborhood schools.² More than 1 million are educated outside of district schools entirely.³ And for the second year in a row, more than 500,000 are using choice scholarships, with a third year likely in 2026-27.⁴

Florida is also one of more than two dozen states that have opted in to the new federal scholarship tax credit program.⁵ It kicks in on January 1, 2027 – and promises to be a [major boost to existing choice programs](#).

Amidst all the change and competition, Florida Catholic schools have adapted and thrived.

That’s why we issued a special report, [“Why Catholic Schools in Florida Are Growing: 5 Things to Know,”](#) in 2023, and followed it up with update briefs in [2024](#) and [2025](#). Like those previous briefs, this one offers quick snapshots of a few major trend lines in Florida.⁶

It also includes a year-by-year breakdown of Catholic school enrollment in all 50 states, going back 10 years, based on the NCEA data. If you’re a supporter of Catholic education, or educational pluralism more broadly, you’ll see continuing declines in some states (like New York and New Jersey) and a few head scratchers (Oregon?) – but also reasons for optimism.

Final note: We wouldn’t know what’s happening with Catholic education in Florida and across America without the FCC and NCEA. Both entities relentlessly gather reams of useful information, on top of everything else they can do, so the rest of us can learn from it. We are grateful.

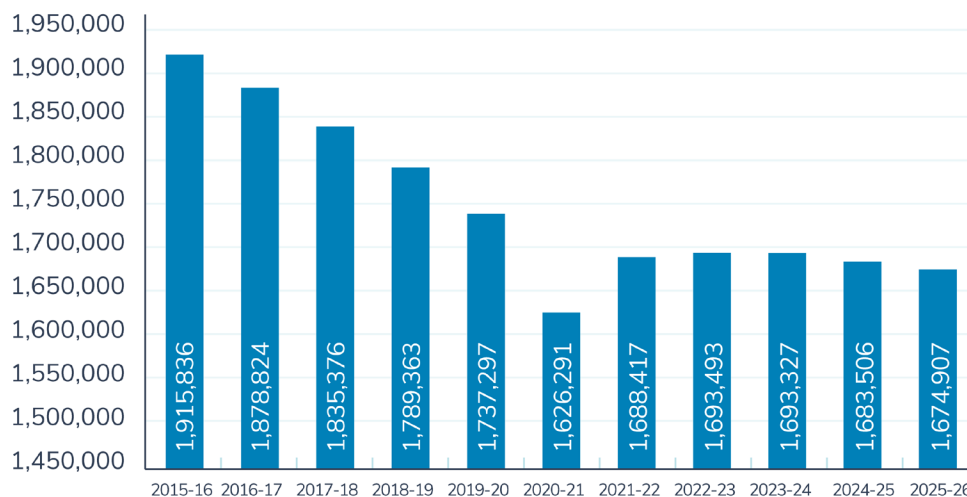
Enrollment

Nationally, Catholic school enrollment stayed relatively constant for a fifth straight year. After decades of falling numbers, that’s a hopeful sign.⁷ (See Figure 2)

In Florida, meanwhile, it’s up for a fifth straight year. (See Figure 3)

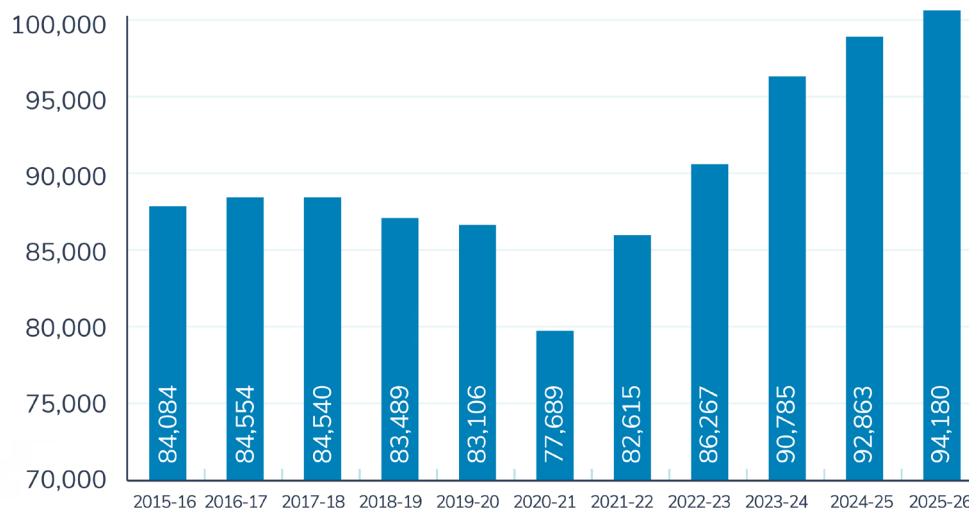
It’s worth noting that the rate of enrollment growth in Florida’s Catholic schools exceeds the growth rate for Florida’s K-12 population overall. Over the past decade, Florida’s K-12 population grew about 10%, while its Catholic school enrollment grew 12%.⁸

Figure 2. Nationwide Catholic School Enrollment in PreK-12



Source: National Catholic Educational Association

Figure 3. Florida Catholic School Enrollment in PreK-12



Source: National Catholic Educational Association

Choice

A decade ago, fewer than a quarter of students enrolled in Florida Catholic schools used state choice scholarships. Today, more than 90% do. (See Figure 4)

Nationally, according to the latest NCEA data, 19.4% of Catholic school students do.⁹

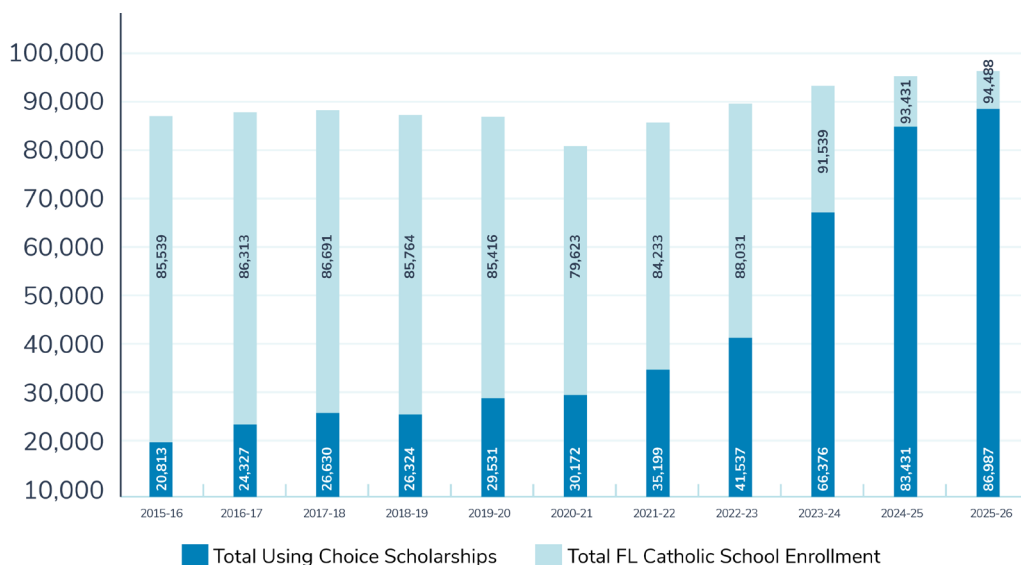
The substantial increases in Florida in the past three years reflect the impact of HB 1, the historic school choice and education choice bill passed by the Florida Legislature in 2023 and signed into law by Gov. Ron DeSantis. HB 1 ended income restrictions for choice scholarships and made every Florida student eligible.

The lion's share of K-12 enrollment in Florida Catholic schools comes from students participating in one of three choice programs: the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Educational Options, and the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Students with Unique Abilities. The FTC is funded by corporate contributions in return for dollar-for-dollar tax credits. The FES Scholarships are funded directly by the state.

(Florida also has a fourth major choice scholarship program – the Personalized Education Program Scholarship for students who are not enrolled in full-time schools.)

More information about each program can be found on the Step Up For Students [website](#).

Figure 4. Share of Choice Scholarship Students in Florida Catholic Schools



Source: Florida Catholic Conference. Note: Total enrollment is slightly higher than the figures from the NCEA, because they include a broader group of preschool students. Scholarship totals also include a small percentage of other state scholarships besides the three listed above, most notably PreK vouchers. This year, 3,286 students are using the latter.

Diversity

Florida's Catholic schools have become increasingly diverse along multiple dimensions, continuing a long tradition of Catholic schools serving significant numbers of low-income students, students of color, and non-Catholic students.

A more recent standout development is the degree to which Florida Catholic schools are serving students who use the state's special needs scholarship. The number of those students has tripled over the past five years, to 13,482 this year. (See Figure 5)

FES-UA students now encompass 14.3% of all Catholic school students in Florida, up from 5.5% five years ago.

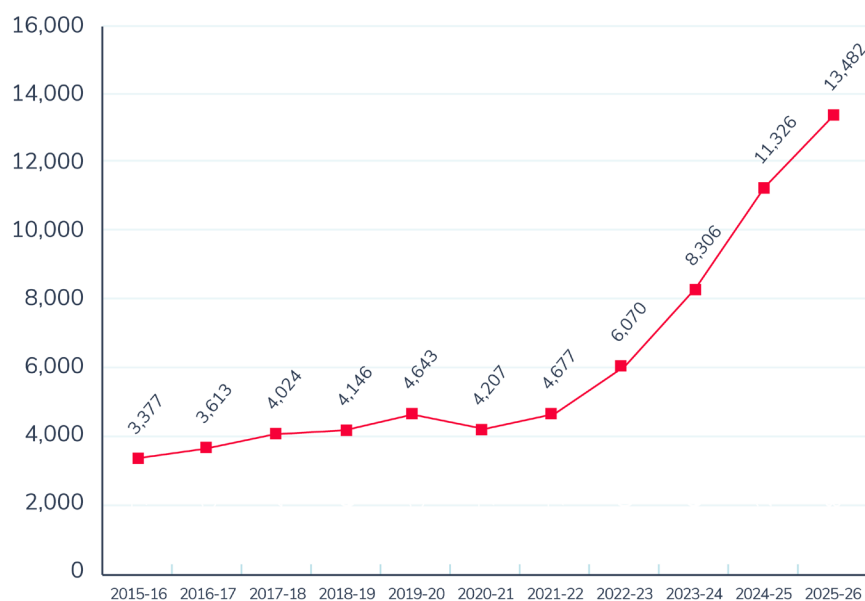
Nationally, the rate of students with diagnosed disabilities in Catholic schools is 10.0%.¹⁰

In Florida public schools, it's 16.3%.¹¹

The trend line in Florida Catholic schools is especially noteworthy given frequent criticism from opponents of school choice that choice programs are not beneficial to students with special needs. Growing numbers of families with special needs children in Catholic schools suggest otherwise.

It is not immediately clear which special needs categories the FES-UA students in Catholic schools are part of, and how those numbers may have changed over time. We hope to gather that data and present it at a later date.

Figure 5. Special Needs Scholarship Students in Florida Catholic Schools



Source: Florida Catholic Conference

Discussion

Over the past decade, the number of private schools in Florida grew by a third, according to the most recent state data available, which runs through 2022-23. That's a net gain of 706 private schools.¹² For context, there are 39 states that don't have that many private schools.¹³

At the same time, Florida has more than 700 charter schools serving more than 400,000 students;¹⁴ more than 700,000 students in magnet schools and other district-created options;¹⁵ and 150,000 students using the flexibility of education savings accounts to access hundreds of microschoools and thousands of à la carte providers.¹⁶

In other words, Florida offers the most competitive educational environment in America – and yet, Florida's Catholic schools have not only thrown themselves into the mix but thrived.

For Catholic schools across America, there are more bright spots, too.

Clearly, there are still too many headlines [like this one from New York](#) and [this one from Boston](#), announcing the closing of yet more Catholic schools in states that refuse to embrace school choice.¹⁷ Given the outsized, positive impact that Catholic schools have had for generations, continued closures are nothing short of tragic.

On the other hand, there are also more headlines [like this one](#) from Ohio, about a new Catholic school emerging in response to demand.¹⁸

The most recent data suggests we're going to see more of the latter. The steady expansion of choice is giving Catholic schools in other states the same thing it did for Catholic schools in Florida: An opportunity to not only compete, but to better actualize their mission of preparing students for college and Heaven.

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

10-year enrollment for US Catholic Schools															
State	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	Change from 2025	% Change from 2025	Change 2016-2026	% Change 2016-2026
Alabama	12,230	11,905	11,533	10,992	10,602	9,353	9,831	9,546	9,735	9,700	9,785	85	0.9%	-2445	-20.0%
Alaska	906	958	1,001	992	942	689	909	869	847	890	737	-153	-17.2%	-169	-18.7%
Arizona	20,282	20,604	20,693	20,647	20,429	20,322	20,761	20,817	21,346	21,449	21,468	19	0.1%	1186	5.8%
Arkansas	6,776	6,799	6,706	6,643	6,498	6,143	6,293	6,428	6,599	6,810	7,059	249	3.7%	283	4.2%
California	210,971	207,925	204,239	199,529	196,117	177,331	186,473	187,101	186,199	183,714	179,495	-4,219	-2.3%	-31476	-14.9%
Colorado	15,103	15,100	15,038	15,033	14,746	15,205	15,989	15,979	16,165	16,078	15,561	-517	-3.2%	458	3.0%
Connecticut	27,949	26,838	25,391	23,861	22,030	20,134	20,546	20,648	20,723	20,495	18,522	-1,973	-9.6%	-9427	-33.7%
Delaware	10,391	10,092	9,805	9,685	9,420	8,520	8,675	8,885	9,004	8,815	8,802	-13	-0.1%	-1589	-15.3%
Florida	84,084	84,554	84,540	83,489	83,106	77,689	82,615	86,267	90,785	92,863	94,180	1,317	1.4%	10096	12.0%
Georgia	16,537	16,608	16,348	16,096	15,445	15,260	15,581	15,578	15,664	15,529	15,351	-178	-1.1%	-1186	-7.2%
Hawaii	8,923	8,911	8,604	8,119	7,503	6,726	7,014	6,640	6,236	5,801	5,355	-446	-7.7%	-3568	-40.0%
Idaho	3,175	3,290	3,499	3,590	3,709	3,715	4,057	4,048	3,984	3,960	4,007	47	1.2%	832	26.2%
Illinois	140,285	135,456	130,123	126,814	122,286	112,258	116,182	114,936	113,361	112,407	110,762	-1,645	-1.5%	-29523	-21.0%
Indiana	55,908	55,623	55,212	54,317	52,325	48,586	50,884	52,628	52,844	52,755	56,723	3,968	7.5%	815	1.5%
Iowa	29,270	28,964	28,704	28,269	27,764	26,565	27,187	26,868	28,680	29,358	30,339	981	3.3%	1069	3.7%
Kansas	28,365	28,280	27,974	27,469	27,262	25,753	26,540	26,674	26,666	26,657	27,495	838	3.1%	-870	-3.1%
Kentucky	36,362	36,424	36,277	35,332	34,745	33,343	34,815	34,764	35,275	35,845	35,501	-344	-1.0%	-861	-2.4%
Louisiana	78,540	76,945	75,238	73,812	72,215	69,176	69,559	70,317	70,333	70,293	69,735	-558	-0.8%	8805	-11.2%
Maine	2,858	2,653	2,533	2,347	1,587	2,104	2,288	2,273	1,944	1,727	1,503	-224	-13.0%	-1355	-47.4%
Maryland	25,287	25,105	24,727	23,861	23,643	23,400	24,297	24,727	24,744	24,749	24,733	-16	-0.1%	-544	-2.2%
Massachusetts	56,331	53,800	51,402	48,899	46,786	43,236	46,235	46,116	45,547	45,479	45,424	-55	-0.1%	-10907	-19.4%
Michigan	53,681	53,027	51,297	50,257	48,246	46,332	49,215	50,386	49,812	49,632	48,243	-1,389	-2.8%	-5438	-10.1%
Minnesota	43,554	43,082	42,914	42,642	41,774	41,526	44,830	45,342	44,870	45,488	44,124	-1,364	-3.0%	570	1.3%
Mississippi	7,723	7,693	7,675	7,476	7,391	6,947	7,584	7,521	7,331	7,437	7,250	-187	-2.5%	-473	-6.1%
Missouri	61,379	59,838	58,403	57,574	56,486	53,971	55,612	55,780	55,326	55,673	55,565	-108	-0.2%	-5814	-9.5%
Montana	3,880	3,886	3,791	3,830	3,845	3,588	3,743	3,848	3,542	3,687	3,581	-106	-2.9%	-299	-7.7%
Nebraska	28,868	29,219	29,057	28,847	28,391	26,745	27,100	27,118	26,935	27,257	27,166	-91	-0.3%	-1702	-5.9%
Nevada	5,665	5,590	5,462	5,322	5,165	5,392	5,498	5,585	5,561	5,582	5,600	18	0.3%	-65	-1.1%
New Hampshire	5,804	5,617	5,363	5,415	5,185	5,304	5,649	5,678	5,707	5,550	6,145	595	10.7%	341	5.9%
New Jersey	80,303	76,578	72,957	69,392	65,497	58,653	60,923	59,645	59,461	58,387	57,204	-1,183	-2.0%	-23099	-28.8%
New Mexico	6,239	5,877	5,811	5,653	5,447	4,978	5,129	4,516	4,936	5,029	4,817	-212	-4.4%	-1422	-22.8%
New York	170,717	165,651	159,447	153,606	145,858	132,822	133,887	129,893	124,638	121,174	116,506	-4,668	-3.9%	-54211	-31.8%
North Carolina	16,504	16,361	16,089	16,051	16,000	15,686	16,849	17,451	17,730	17,911	17,923	12	0.1%	1419	8.6%
North Dakota	4,722	4,813	4,802	4,960	4,980	4,997	5,277	5,203	5,560	5,693	5,695	2	0.04%	973	20.6%
Ohio	129,349	127,176	125,688	123,749	121,315	116,654	118,859	118,861	119,285	120,066	123,313	3,247	2.7%	-6036	-4.7%
Oklahoma	9,627	9,579	9,515	9,710	9,575	8,925	9,051	9,160	9,309	9,458	9,713	255	2.7%	86	0.9%
Oregon	15,447	15,201	15,262	15,249	15,136	14,322	15,606	15,513	15,325	12,534	14,883	2,349	18.7%	-564	-3.7%
Pennsylvania	131,018	126,771	122,569	117,290	111,835	103,464	105,432	104,108	104,533	102,509	99,692	-2,817	-2.7%	-31326	-23.9%
Rhode Island	11,767	11,428	10,825	10,367	9,918	9,192	9,637	9,612	9,731	8,518	9,778	1,260	14.8%	-1989	-16.9%
South Carolina	7,206	7,273	7,164	7,042	6,908	6,981	7,157	7,523	7,588	7,583	7,446	-137	-1.8%	240	3.3%
South Dakota	5,814	5,545	5,729	5,649	5,579	5,328	5,449	5,386	5,500	5,486	5,653	167	3.0%	-161	-2.8%
Tennessee	16,728	16,384	16,196	15,519	13,844	12,658	13,897	14,435	14,204	12,896	12,897	1	0.01%	-3831	-22.9%
Texas	77,188	74,967	71,887	70,022	67,348	60,626	62,256	64,243	64,501	64,283	64,355	72	0.1%	-12833	-16.6%
Utah	5,441	5,231	5,209	5,016	4,757	4,362	4,757	4,848	4,755	4,954	4,824	-130	-2.6%	-617	-11.3%
Vermont	1,997	1,979	1,944	1,951	1,908	1,835	2,006	1,972	2,079	2,155	2,158	3	0.1%	161	8.1%
Virginia	26,556	26,541	26,290	25,947	25,518	25,061	27,269	27,717	27,802	27,415	27,183	-232	-0.8%	627	2.4%
Washington	28,145	28,049	27,677	25,795	26,748	25,221	26,989	27,029	27,290	27,492	27,280	-212	-0.8%	-865	-3.1%
Washington D.C.	26,822	26,856	26,254	26,171	25,693	24,374	25,557	26,074	26,168	26,350	25,802	-548	-2.1%	-1020	-3.8%
West Virginia	5,667	5,448	5,112	4,965	4,627	4,045	4,259	4,422	4,564	4,653	4,904	251	5.4%	-763	-13.5%
Wisconsin	56,518	55,411	54,427	53,090	52,226	50,054	51,497	51,723	51,820	52,492	51,840	-652	-1.2%	-4678	-8.3%
Wyoming	974	919	973	1,010	937	740	712	792	783	788	830	42	5.3%	-144	-14.8%
United States	1,915,836	1,878,824	1,835,376	1,789,363	1,737,297	1,626,291	1,688,417	1,693,493	1,693,327	1,683,506	1,674,907	-8,599	-0.5%	-240929	-12.6%

Endnotes

¹ Florida ranked No. 1 in education choice share in 2026. See Colyn Ritter, “2026 EdChoice Share,” EdChoice, January 6, 2026, <https://www.edchoice.org/2026-edchoice-share/>.

² Patrick R. Gibbons, “Record 53% of Florida’s K-12 Students Use Education Choice Options,” Next Steps (blog), January 30, 2026, <https://nextstepsblog.org/2026/01/record-53-of-floridas-k-12-students-use-education-choice-options/>.

³ We don’t have complete enrollment data yet for 2025-26. But in 2024-25, there were 469,519 students in private schools, 406,832 students in charter schools, and 152,871 students in home schools, for a total of 1,029,222 outside of district schools. Data compiled from multiple sources, including Florida Department of Education enrollment reports and databases, 2024–25.

⁴ Step Up For Students served 532,256 students across six programs in 2024-25, and 537,810 across four programs in 2025-26. At the time of this draft, 486,000 students were on applications for 2026-27. Data provided by Step Up For Students.

⁵ Roger Mooney, “Florida governor opts in to Federal Scholarship Tax Credit program, Step Up For Students announces plans to administer,” Next Steps (blog), January 28, 2026, <https://nextstepsblog.org/2026/01/florida-governor-opts-in-to-federal-scholarship-tax-credit-program-step-up-for-students-announces-plans-to-administer/>

⁶ Lauren May, Mary Camp, Patrick Gibbons, and Ron Matus, “Why Florida Catholic Schools Are Growing,” Next Steps (blog), April 1, 2024, <https://nextstepsblog.org/2024/04/the-most-encouraging-trend-lines-for-catholic-schools-in-america/>; Lauren May, Mary Camp, Patrick Gibbons, and Ron Matus, “Catholic School Update Brief 2025,” Next Steps (blog), June 3, 2025, <https://nextstepsblog.org/2025/06/catholic-enrollment-update-2025/>.

⁷ National Catholic Educational Association, *United States Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools, 2025–2026: The Annual Statistical Report on Schools, Enrollment, and Staffing* (Arlington, VA: National Catholic Educational Association, 2026).

⁸ State-level data on private school and home education enrollment in Florida are not yet available for 2025–26, so total K–12 enrollment for that year cannot be calculated or compared with 2015–16. Between 2014–15 and 2024–25, total K–12 enrollment across the public, private, and home education sectors in Florida grew by 9.8%.

⁹ *United States Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools, 2025-26*, 36.

¹⁰ *United States Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools, 2025-26*, 32.

¹¹ Florida Department of Education, “PK–12 Enrollment Map,” Know Your Data Portal, accessed March 25, 2026, https://edudata.fldoe.org/AdvancedReports_Tableau.html?StudentEnrollments=true.

¹² This information is drawn from annual private school reports published by the Florida Department of Education. The most recent report covers the 2022–23 school year. <https://www.fldoe.org/schools/school-choice/private-schools/annual-reports.stml>.

¹³ National Center for Education Statistics, “Table 15. Number of Private Schools, Students, Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) Teachers, and 2020–21 High School Graduates, by State: United States, School Year 2021–22,” *Private School Universe Survey*, <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/pss/tables/TABLE15f2122.asp>.

¹⁴ Florida Department of Education, “Florida Charter School Fact Sheet,” October 2023 (reporting 726 charter schools in 2022-23); Florida Department of Education, “PK-12 Enrollment Map,” Know Your Data Portal, accessed March 26, 2026 (shows 408,481 charter school students in 2025-26), https://edudata.fldoe.org/AdvancedReports_Tableau.html?StudentEnrollments=true.

¹⁵ Gibbons, “Record 53% of Florida’s K-12 Students Use Education Choice Options.”

¹⁶ That’s according to Step Up For Students data and reflects trend lines documented in David Heroux and Ron Matus, “The Rise of À La Carte Learning,” Next Steps (blog), November 17, 2025, <https://nextstepsblog.org/2025/11/floridas-a-la-carte-learning-boom-a-special-report/>.

¹⁷ Emma Barnett, “7 Catholic Elementary Schools to Close in Brooklyn, Queens by End of School Year,” Spectrum News NY 1, February 11, 2026, <https://ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/news/2026/02/11/catholic-elementary-schools-close-brooklyn-queens-diocese>; Beth Treffeisen, “A Nearly 100-Year-Old Catholic School in Medford Is Closing,” Boston.com, March 11, 2026, <https://www.boston.com/news/local-news/2026/03/11/a-nearly-100-year-old-catholic-school-in-medford-is-closing/>.

¹⁸ Hannah Heil, “New Catholic School Set to Open This Fall,” *The Catholic Times*, January 27, 2026, <https://catholictimescolumbus.org/schools/new-catholic-school-set-to-open-this-fall/>

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About the organizations



The **Florida Catholic Conference** and the **Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops** are the two corporations of the Catholic bishops of Florida. The Conference is the nonpartisan voice of the bishops that carries out policy and advocacy activities. It also accredits and ensures the continual improvement of Catholic schools and coordinates disaster relief efforts with Catholic Charities agencies across Florida.



Step Up For Students is a nonprofit that administers multiple education choice scholarship programs in Florida, including the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, the Family Empowerment Scholarship, and the Personalized Education Program Scholarship.