

## The case for educational choice

By JON EAST  
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Parents with financial means long have chosen their children's schools by where they live or which private tuition they pay, but Florida is approaching a remarkable threshold in educational choice. Last year, 1.5 million students — or 43 percent — attended something other than their neighborhood school. Of special note, 51,023 of the poorest among them are attending a private school at public expense.

This move toward customizing public education is owed to a simple proposition — that different children learn in different ways — and it represents an extraordinary commitment to equal opportunity. In Alachua County last year, 5,800 students chose magnet or choice programs or used open enrollment, and another 2,200 went to charter schools. This year, 335 low-income students are also attending private schools through state-backed scholarships.

That last learning option, called Florida Tax Credit Scholarships, gives pause to the Alachua League of Women Voters. Its respected president, Kathy Kidder, recently questioned the program's constitutionality and accountability. She cited a state Supreme Court case, the 2006 dismissal of a voucher given to students in schools judged to be failing, without noting two

prominent U.S. Supreme Court precedents that affirm the scholarship's constitutionality.

The first, a 2002 case from Cleveland, rules that religious schools cannot be excluded from private voucher programs as long as the primary goal is education and parents aren't coerced into choosing. The second, a 2011 case from Arizona, finds tax credit scholarships to be in a separate constitutional arena altogether. In Arizona, the court ruled that tax-credited contributions are not government expenditures.

The more important measure, though, is educational progress. The \$4,335 scholarship is available only to children in K-12 whose household income qualifies them for free or reduced-price lunch, and this year the average income is just 6 percent above the poverty line. Two-thirds of the students are black or Hispanic, and more than half live in households with only one parent. More striking, the students who choose the scholarship are the lowest academic achievers from the public schools they leave behind.

The encouraging news is that these same students, according to the latest annual standardized test scores, are achieving the same gains in reading and math as students of all income levels nationally. The students do not take the FCAT, which will be phased out in public schools after next spring, but

they are required to take nationally norm-referenced tests approved by the state, and most take the Stanford Achievement test. Since the state used to include the Stanford alongside the FCAT, the correlation is not difficult.

This record of achievement is one reason the scholarship now enjoys bipartisan political support. Though the original law was passed in 2001 with the support of Republicans and only one Democrat, it was expanded in 2010 with the support of nearly half of Democrats and a majority of the Black Caucus. Just last week, at a capital rally of school choice families, former Democratic Senate Leader Al Lawson told the audience: "My grandmother taught school for 40 years, and one thing she instilled in me is that kids need to have and their parents need to have a choice."

The point of educational choice — from magnets to charters to online courses to career academies — is to match students to the schools that work best for them. And we know that children who grow up in poverty struggle the most and tend to have the fewest options. That's why a scholarship for underprivileged children strengthens, not competes against, public education. *Jon East is vice president of policy and public affairs for Step Up For Students, the nonprofit that oversees Tax Credit Scholarships.*