

OVERVIEW

Charters:

Florida is one of 43 states, including the District of Columbia, that permit charter schools. Florida's charter law was enacted in 1996 and places no cap on charter school growth. Under state law, charters may be authorized by local school boards, state universities, and community college district boards of trustees.

There are currently 625 charter schools in the state, [enrolling an estimated 239,996 students](#).

FLORIDA'S CHARTERS

Year of Charter Law – 1996

NAPCS Ranking of Charter Law – 8 of 43

Total Charters – 625

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) ranks Florida's charter law as among the strongest nationwide (8th out of 43 states).

Vouchers or Other State Assistance for Private School Choice:

Florida's school choice landscape includes vouchers, tax credit scholarships, and education savings account programs.

State Laws on Other Forms of School Choice:

Florida has a voluntary, "controlled" open enrollment program for student transfers between school districts. School districts may offer open enrollment in order to allow school assignments using parents' preferred school of choice as a significant factor.

CHARTER SCHOOLS

History

- Public charters have been allowed under state law since 1996.
- There is no cap on the number of charter schools that can be approved.
- As of the 2013-14 school year, 625 charter schools are in operation, [enrolling 239,996 students](#).

PERCENT OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN CHARTERS
2011-2012

**Details**

- Under state law, charter schools may be authorized by local school boards, state universities (for laboratory schools), and community college district boards of trustees (for career technical centers).
 - An applicant may appeal for a review by the State Board of Education if the charter is denied.
- Florida allows start-up charter schools, traditional public to charter school conversions, and virtual charter schools.
- Charters must comply with many of the same rules and regulations as traditional public schools, including participation in the state accountability system.
 - Charter school governing boards must [report annually on school progress](#). Charters earning a “D” or “F” grade on the accountability metrics must meet with the school authorizer and submit a plan to raise student achievement.
- Teachers employed by charter schools are [required to be certified](#).

FINDINGS ON CHARTERS IN FLORIDA

A [report by the Florida Department of Education](#) comparing charter schools and traditional public school results from 2012-13 found that:

- **Charter school students outperformed traditional public school students in reading and math on the FCAT across grade levels.**
- More students in traditional public school scored at proficient or above on middle school Algebra exams than charter students.
- Florida charter schools had smaller achievement gaps in all measured subject areas.

The Center for Research and Education Outcomes at Stanford University conducted a [National Charter School Study](#) in 2013 comparing the performance of states’ charter and public school students. The study considered the effect that enrolling in a charter school had on a student’s academic performance, specifically measuring how much academic growth charter students attained over the course of one year compared to similar students in traditional public schools. Researchers found that the average **Florida charter school student loses the equivalent of seven days of reading instruction each year compared to traditional public school peers**. There was no difference in math.

VOUCHERS OR OTHER STATE ASSISTANCE FOR PRIVATE SCHOOL CHOICE

Florida has developed and enacted a number of choice programs including vouchers, tax credit scholarships, and education savings account programs.

Opportunity Scholarship Program

- The [Opportunity Scholarship Program](#) was signed into law by Governor Jeb Bush in 1999 as part of Florida's A+ Education Plan. Under the original design, students who attended or were assigned to failing schools had the option to enroll in a higher-performing public school or participating private school. **After a legal challenge that reached the Florida Supreme Court, students today are only able to transfer to a higher-performing public school.**
- Students are eligible to request a transfer to a different public school if they were enrolled the prior year, or will be assigned the next school year to a school that earned an "F" grade or three consecutive "Ds" on the state School Accountability Reports.
- A student may request to attend a higher-performing public school within the district or in another school district, provided there is space available.

John M. McKay Scholarships for Students with Disabilities

- The [McKay Scholarship program](#) was established by the state legislature in 1999.
- Students are [eligible for a voucher to a different school of their choice](#) if they have a disability and have been enrolled in a public school for at least one year.
 - An eligible student may attend another public school within the district, an eligible public school in an adjacent district that has space and appropriate services, or an eligible private school.
- There is no enrollment cap on the program. The state does not require participating students to take the FCAT or other standardized tests, although they have the option to do so.
- Vouchers are worth the same amount a public school would have spent on a participating child (the amount may not exceed the private school's tuition and fees).
- In 2013-14, there were 27,040 participating students and 1,226 participating schools.

Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program

- Enacted in 2001, the program provides a tax credit on corporate income taxes and insurance premium taxes for donations to scholarship funding organizations.
- Businesses receive a 100 percent credit for donations made, with total credits capped at \$286.25 million.
- Scholarships are worth up to \$4,800 but may not exceed private school tuition and fees.
- Students eligible for scholarships include those in foster care and those who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Legislation passed in 2014 will also allow middle-income families to qualify for partial scholarships beginning in 2016.
- The 2014 legislation also [removes a requirement](#) that students attend a public school before becoming eligible for a scholarship.

VOUCHERS OR OTHER STATE ASSISTANCE FOR PRIVATE SCHOOL CHOICE

- In August 2014, the Florida Education Association, the Florida School Boards Association, and the Florida Parent Teacher Association filed a lawsuit [challenging the constitutionality of the program](#).
 - A separate lawsuit filed against the program was [dismissed in September 2014](#) after the judge ruled the plaintiff, a high school social studies teacher, did not have standing to bring the case. The suit challenged the 2014 legislation that expanded the Tax Credit Scholarship Program and established Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts.

Personal Learning Scholarship Account Program

- The program was [established by legislation in May 2014](#) and is modeled on Arizona’s Empowerment Scholarship Accounts. Florida is now the second state to establish “education savings accounts.”
- The Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts (PLSAs) are funded by the state, and participating families have the flexibility to apply money in the accounts toward a combination of education expenses, including private school tuition, tutoring, therapies, online education, and postsecondary institutions in Florida.
- Students are eligible for the scholarships if they are state residents, have a diagnosed disability, and are eligible to attend kindergarten through 12th grade. Only students enrolled in a private, parochial/religious, or home education program are eligible; *a student may not receive a PLSA and attend a public school*.
- Money in the scholarship account may [roll over year to year](#) and remains in the account until a student graduates from a postsecondary institution or until a student has gone four years after high school with no further education.
- The funding in a student’s account is based on factors including grade level, county of residence, and a student’s individual needs. The [average amount for 2014-15 is approximately \\$10,000](#), and accounts will be available to roughly 1,800 students. The accounts will be awarded on a first-come, first-served basis.
- Students may not receive both a PLSA and a McKay Scholarship for Students with Disabilities.

FINDINGS ON STATE ASSISTANCE FOR PRIVATE SCHOOL CHOICE IN FLORIDA

The legislation establishing the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program required the Department of Education to evaluate the program’s results. It contracted with Dr. David Figlio, a Research Associate at the National Bureau of Economic Research, to produce a series of reports analyzing annual results. The 2013 report, analyzing results from the 2011-12 academic year, found that program participants tended to come from less-advantaged families than other students receiving free or reduced-price lunch. **Participants were more likely to have been enrolled in lower-performing public schools and were among the lowest-performing students in their prior schools**, regardless of the school’s performance level. [Analysis for the 2012-13 academic year](#) found that scholarship students were making academic gains on pace and gained a year’s worth of learning in math and reading during the academic year.

STATE POLICIES ON OTHER FORMS OF SCHOOL CHOICE

Open Enrollment

- Florida has a [voluntary, controlled open enrollment program](#) for student transfers between districts.
- Each school district is [required by law](#) to design an open enrollment plan that includes considerations to maintain socioeconomic, demographic, and racial balance. However, districts are not required to implement their plans and [retain the autonomy](#) to decide whether to offer open enrollment.
- In the 2012-13 school year, [more than 309,400 students](#) in 50 of the state's 67 districts (11 percent of the total public school population) attended a public school through controlled open enrollment.
- Students can apply to attend any district in the state, but the district has discretion over which school a student may enroll.
- Parents are responsible for providing transportation if the student enrolls outside his or her residential district.
 - Families with incomes at or below 160 percent of the federal poverty threshold are eligible for a transportation stipend or will be provided transportation. The resident district makes this determination.

Virtual Schools

- The Florida Virtual School (FLVS) is the largest virtual school in the country, serving students in grades K-12 through both full-time and part-time coursework. The FLVS had [more than 410,00 successful course completions in 2013-14](#).
 - The FLVS began in 1997 through a Florida Department of Education grant to Orange and Alachua counties to establish a virtual public high school. After the grant was completed, the school was funded as a line item in the state budget.
 - In 2003, the Florida legislature approved including FLVS in the state funding formula as a statewide virtual school and implemented a performance-based pay program which allocates funds only for students who successfully complete their courses.
 - In Spring 2013, FLVS part-time students performed more than 15 percentage points higher than the state average on all four End-of-Course exams (Algebra 1, Geometry, Biology, and U.S. History).
 - FLVS students [outperformed the state qualifying average for Advanced Placement](#) in 13 of 16 courses in 2013.
- All virtual schools and programs in Florida are [designated by law as school choice options](#), and districts may not restrict student access to Florida Virtual School courses.
- The state also allows virtual charter schools, the first of which opened in 2012-13.
- More than 240,000 students enrolled in online courses through part-time or full-time programs in 2013-14.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

[Does Competition Improve Public Schools? New evidence from the Florida tax-credit scholarship program](#)

[Evaluation of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program: Participation, Compliance, and Test Scores in 2011-12](#)

[Florida Charter School FAQs](#)

[Florida's Charter Schools: A Comparison of the Performance of Charter School Students with Traditional Public School Students](#)

[Florida Virtual School: 2013-14](#)

[Keeping Pace with K-12 Online & Blended Learning](#)

[School Choice Options: Florida Continues to Lead the State](#)