



Briefing Paper: Florida's Voucher Schemes

Florida began the first statewide voucher scheme in 1999. The Opportunity Scholarship Program paid private school tuition for students who transferred from struggling public schools. In 2006 the Florida Supreme Court ruled that the state's Constitution barred this broad voucher program. Florida voters rejected a proposed constitutional amendment in 2012 that would have allowed lawmakers to restore it.

The state has two other voucher schemes. The Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship Vouchers program allows businesses to divert money they would otherwise pay in taxes to a private entity that funds tuition vouchers at private and religious schools. The John McKay Scholarships for Students with Disabilities Program provides vouchers to special-education students. The state has repeatedly expanded both programs over the years despite the lack of evidence that they actually help students.

VOUCHERS DRAIN MILLIONS OF DOLLARS FROM FLORIDA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

- The Corporate Tax Credit program enrolled nearly 33,000 students in the 2010-11 school year with \$140 million in tax-credit donations. The McKay program enrolled more than 21,000 students in the 2010-11 school year at a cost of about \$152 million.ⁱ Private schools may discriminate and choose which voucher students to admit or reject.
- Costs of the voucher programs have risen significantly. For example, the cost of the McKay program increased by nearly 500 percent in just one year, from \$5.8 million during the first year to nearly \$28 million in the 2001-02 school year. The cost was more than five times that in 2010-11.ⁱⁱ
- Florida public schools have had to deal with the cost of voucher students returning from private schools mid-year. For example, one in four students who took vouchers returned to public schools during the 2002-03 school year, forcing the public schools to educate all returning students without any financial support from the state.ⁱⁱⁱ

FLORIDA'S VOUCHER PROGRAMS HAVE FAILED STUDENTS

- A 2009 study ordered by the Florida Legislature found that students using tax credit vouchers to attend private schools in the state performed no better or worse than similar students in public schools.^{iv}
- A 2007 study from Education Sector, a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank, found that despite its increasing expense, "the McKay program has not yet proven that it works as either an adequate school-choice or special-education reform measure." The state does little to monitor schools participating in the program or to hold those schools accountable for the progress of their voucher students. As a consequence, the report's writers said, "it is virtually impossible to say whether special-needs children using McKay vouchers to attend private schools are faring better, worse, or about the same as they had in their old public schools."^v
- Schools accepting McKay vouchers for students with disabilities are not required to provide any special-education services at all. In fact, families accepting a McKay scholarship to transfer their child to a private school must waive their legal rights and special educational services guaranteed under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).^{vi}
- McKay schools may discriminate on the basis of religion, gender or disability.^{vii}

ⁱ "Florida Voucher Programs," National School Boards Association, <http://www.nsba.org/Advocacy/Key-Issues/SchoolVouchers/VoucherStrategyCenter/State-and-City-Voucher-Programs/FloridaVoucherPrograms>

ⁱⁱ *Jeopardizing a Legacy: A Closer Look at IDEA and Florida's Disability Voucher Program*, People for the American Way and the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, March 2003.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Many reject vouchers, return to private schools," *Miami Herald*, November 3, 2002.

^{iv} "School vouchers study finds little difference between public schools, private schools," *Tampa Bay Times*, June 29, 2009.

^v "Information Underload: Florida's Flawed Special-Ed Voucher Program," Education Sector, June 2007, <http://www.educationsector.org/publications/information-underload-floridas-flawed-special-ed-voucher-program>.

^{vi} "Information Underload: Florida's Flawed Special-Ed Voucher Program," Education Sector, June 2007.

^{vii} *Jeopardizing a Legacy: A Closer Look at IDEA and Florida's Disability Voucher Program*, People for the American Way and the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, March 2003.