

Voucher Funded School Accountability

The Florida Legislature has established, as part of the K-12 public education system, voucher/scholarship programs allowing parents of public school students to seek private school options financed by public tax dollars or tax credits. In 2006, the Florida Supreme Court struck down the state's Opportunity Scholarship program, ruling it violated the state Constitution's "uniformity" clause. In spite of this ruling, other voucher/scholarship programs have prevailed.

The **Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship Program** allows corporations to donate funds to foundations, in lieu of state taxes, that issue vouchers to low-income students to attend private/parochial schools. Nearly 60,000 students receive tax credit scholarships according to the Florida Department of Education's most recent quarterly report, which amounts to \$286 Million in tax credits for participating corporations for the reporting year 2013-2014.

Florida is one of only 11 states with a Tax Credit Scholarship Program. To be eligible, a family's income would amount to no more than 185% of the federal poverty level, which is approximately \$43,500 for a family of four, and a student must have been enrolled in a public school the previous year. **NOTE:** Senate Bill 1620, recently filed by Senator Bill Galvano, revises student eligibility criteria, revised the tax credit cap to 100%, and deletes the requirement that a student must be enrolled in a public school the previous year.

The **John M. McKay Scholarship Program** allows students with disabilities to transfer from any public school (regardless of school ranking) to a private/parochial school. In 1999, the first year of the McKay program, only six children were involved in the program. According to the Florida Department of Education's November 2013 Quarterly Report, 27,040 students have received McKay Scholarships with 1,226 private schools participating in the program. Individual scholarship amounts range from \$5,500 to \$22,000 per year depending on the student's Individual Education Plan (IEP) requirements.

Both our state and federal governments hold all public schools accountable for student performance at acceptable levels through implementation of a system of school improvement and accountability that assesses student and school performance. Voucher/scholarship programs do not provide accountability. Private/parochial schools are not required to follow the state standards for curriculum content, achievement measures, teacher certification or instructional materials. Private schools are not required to report test or enrollment data, discipline records and practices or other basic information.

With lack of accountability requirements, taxpayers have no knowledge of how their money is being spent and neither taxpayers nor parents have access to solid information about the performance of participating private institutions and non-public schools.

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Florida PTA Position

While continuing to oppose vouchers in all forms, Florida PTA urges the Legislature to impose strict eligibility requirements on private institutions and non-public K-12 schools receiving public dollars through any state funded voucher, grant or scholarship programs, and at a minimum, require them to meet the same accountability standards, at their cost, as public schools, including, but not limited to:

- 1) school wide participation in any statewide assessment program by mandating all current standardized tests;
- 2) assignment of an annual school performance grade category designation and improvement rating to be published in the Commissioner of Education's annual statewide assessment report;
- 3) compliance with Florida Public Records Laws and requirement for independent audits to assess how taxpayer money is being spent; and
- 4) regulations to ensure private institutions and non-public schools are adequately equipped to meet the educational needs of their students.