

FLORIDA

Overall Market Rating: **Growth Ready**

Florida continues to be one of the strongest of the prospective markets for private school creation. It combines a streamlined regulatory structure with adequate per pupil funding and significant need and demand.

Market Overview

The Florida private school choice ecosystem is strong and well developed, as evidenced by 40% growth in private school enrollment since 2013-14. In spring 2023 Florida made eligibility for scholarships universal; however, should scholarship demand outstrip available choice funds, students eligible for free/reduced lunch would have priority. Scholarship amounts are uniform across three of the state's four scholarship programs but vary by county according to relative cost of living. Scholarships for students with unique abilities (FES-UA) can be worth higher amounts. The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship (FTC) is funded by corporate tax credits; all of the other programs are now funded out of the general state budget.

These programs are anchored by a strong set of laws and regulations. Funding across all programs remains steady and increasing: Over \$2 billion flowed into students' scholarship accounts during 2022-23. Private schools that participate in the programs are subject to very few regulations other than those that govern all private schools. A single nonprofit entity, Step Up for Students, serves as the statewide interface for families applying for the scholarships. This streamlining has proved beneficial for recipients and schools.

Given the strong set of policies supporting school choice, there is virtually no cap on the number of students who can receive a publicly funded scholarship. The main limitation is proving to be supply, as the combination of population growth and favorable conditions has filled available private-school seats in many regions of the state. In recent years, tens of thousands of students have been awarded scholarships but been unable to find a suitable seat in which to use them.

Enrollment

FLORIDA 2022-23			
Total PK-12	Public District	Public Charter	Private
3,315,574	2,488,140 (75%)	382,367 (12%)	445,067 (13%)

Choice Programs

Program	Eligibility	Participants (2022-23)	Avg. Amount
Florida Tax Credit Scholarship	Universal (priority for FRL-eligible)	97,870 students 2,000+ schools	\$7,200
Florida Empowerment Scholarship	Universal (priority for FRL-eligible)	88,114 students 2,000+ schools	\$7,200
Florida Empowerment Scholarship – Unique Abilities	Students with specific learning challenges or disabilities	69,513 students 2,000+ schools	\$9,700
HOPE Scholarship	Bullied students	788 students	\$7,200

Funding

Assessment: Strong and improving

Assets:

- Funding in all programs is consistent and increasing over time.
- Schools are not responsible for raising funds for student scholarships. This is all handled by Step Up for Students, the statewide scholarship organization.
- Payments are made directly to schools in clear, quarterly installments.
- Funding caps are structured to rise in proportion to public-school funding.

Challenges:

- The FES-UA is only available to students with certain special needs.

Policy & Regulatory Environment

Assessment: Strong and improving

Assets:

- School eligibility to participate in a choice program can be demonstrated by three years of school operations or by securing a surety bond equal to one quarter’s scholarship payments.
- Private school teachers are required to hold a bachelor’s degree or higher, but they do not need to be licensed or credentialed.
- Participating schools must administer national norm-referenced assessments but have a number of assessments to choose from and can request additional flexibility.

Considerations:

- Schools with more than 30 students with test scores in consecutive years in grades 3-10 must report test scores publicly.
- There is no statewide accountability or sanction for low-performing private schools.
- Schools must offer a 180-day instructional calendar or a 170-day instructional calendar that includes the instructional-hours equivalent of 180 days.

- Schools that accept more than \$250,000 annually across all state scholarship programs must secure an independent auditor to report on a series of financial controls and report those findings to a scholarship funding organization annually.

With very few exceptions, private schools that elect to participate in Florida school choice programs maintain their independence and autonomy. There are no governance or organizational limitations on schools other than those in place for all private schools operating in Florida. Schools do not have to offer any specific curricular programs, and there are no specific course requirements or exclusions. They must adhere to federal standards of non-discrimination and state and local standards for health and safety and building occupancy, but no other restrictions exist.

The market is hospitable to new schools, as schools do not have to be in operation prior to accepting scholarship recipients. The Department of Education must conduct site visits to private schools entering a scholarship program for the first time. New participating schools must complete a satisfactory visit from the DOE and be in compliance to receive scholarship funding. The site visits are intended to be scheduled and completed in time to allow first-year schools to accept scholarship students and receive funding in their first year of operation. Also, payments in all programs flow quickly to the participating schools, with the first installment made in early September of each school year.

Private schools are not subject to restrictive requirements for teacher and staff hiring. Teachers must hold a bachelor's degree or higher and have either: a) three years of teaching experience, or b) special skills that qualify them to teach the subject or material for which they are responsible. All school staff must complete required background checks. Teachers who hold a teaching license are deemed to satisfy these requirements. School owners and operators, prior to employment or engagement to provide services, and at least every five years, must undergo Level 2 background screening.

Human Capital

Assessment: Acceptable and consistent

Assets:

- Private schools have flexibility for staff hiring and placement.
- Teach for America has 700+ alumni across three markets (Miami-Dade, Jacksonville, Orlando).
- Step Up For Students, the largest scholarship organization, provides free professional development services.

Considerations:

- TFA corps members are only engaged with district schools.
- There is little or no coordination around developing private school talent.
- Rapid population growth across the state has led to increased hiring needs and made the market for teachers highly competitive.

In general, human capital strategies are missing from the Florida private school choice landscape. While schools enjoy a great deal of flexibility and freedom in hiring and placing instructional talent, there is no system-level infrastructure in place to ensure the quality of that talent or to assist new or expanding schools in sourcing talent.

Local Champions & Climate

Assessment: Strong and consistent

Assets:

- There is a coordinated constellation of advocacy groups, including civic, political, and grassroots leadership.
- Multiple state organizations (e.g., Step Up for Students, American Federation for Children) are focused on shared objectives, with clear roles and responsibilities.
- There is strong political support and leadership from elected officials.
- Well-funded political and issue advocacy capacities have provided for the passage, improvement and protection of choice programs.

Considerations:

- Advocacy has not sought to implement and nurture policies that support operator and ecosystem growth.

The school choice advocacy community is strong, well-organized and well-funded. Several local organizations have aligned their efforts to ensure political, community and grassroots support for the preservation and expansion of school choice opportunities in Florida. Political support remains strongly bipartisan, although choice opponents have been successful in using litigation strategy to defeat some choice initiatives.

Facilities

Assessment: Not adequate to meet the needs of new entrants to the market

Considerations:

- No provisions are in place to make surplus facilities available to private schools.
- There is no public source of facilities funding, and any additional mechanism to move public money into private schools would likely be challenged in court.
- There is not adequate capital support for facilities in either the charter or private school market at this time.

Many private schools share space with a church or other similar organization and do not think much about facilities issues. It is estimated that most schools allocate roughly 25% of their operating budgets to facilities acquisition and maintenance, but this percentage is likely rising in the face of overall inflation and escalating Florida property values.