



PRIVATE SCHOOL CHOICE

Impact on Public School Students in Florida

ExcelinEd Policy Toolkit - 2020

BACKGROUND

The first private school choice program in the nation was enacted in Milwaukee, WI, in 1990. Today [26 states, Puerto Rico and Washington, D.C.](#), have private school choice options for students. These options come in the form of tax-credit scholarships, vouchers and education scholarship accounts.

While private school choice programs can be controversial, an increasingly large body of research suggests that most programs lead to improved educational opportunities and outcomes for students. To date, 16 studies find neutral or improved academic outcomes for students who exercise private school choice. [Fourteen studies](#) find improved academic outcomes for students who remain in public schools but live in areas where private school choice programs exist. **These findings matter, because detractors of private school choice programs often claim that these programs have detrimental impacts on public school students.**

NATIONAL BUREAU OF ECONOMIC RESEARCH STUDY

A new [study](#) from the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) builds on this body of research. It examines the effects of the [largest](#) private school choice program in the country—the Florida Tax-Credit Scholarship Program (FTC). The FTC was established in 2001. Since that time, it has [steadily grown](#) from serving 15,585 students in 2002-03 students to 107,667 students in 2019-20, nearly 4 percent the size of the K-12 student population of Floridaⁱ

Figlio, Hart and Karbownick, authors of the NBER study, were interested in how the growth, or “scaling up,” of the FTC affected students who remained in public schools. Their question: *What happens when the number of students using private school vouchers grows to encompass a sizeable fraction of the overall student body?*ⁱⁱ

Using child-level data from the Florida Department of Education and the Florida Department of Health, the authors assessed outcomes for roughly 1.2 million public-school students in grades 3-8 between 2003 and 2017. They examined academic outcomes (test scores) and behavioral outcomes (absences and suspensions) in the context of the “competitive pressure” public schools experience when increasing numbers of students use the FTC to attend nearby private schools.ⁱⁱⁱ

FTC Evaluations Find Academic Gains

[Annual evaluations](#) of the FTC, which Florida statute requires, have found consistently over the last 11 years that participating students make academic gains. FTC student gains are on par with the national average for all students. These gains are even more meaningful considering that, by definition, students who participate in the FTC are from lower income families. Other studies of the FTC have considered impacts on students who remain in public schools. [One](#) found that low-performing public schools in Florida saw a 15-percentage point improvement in math after facing competition from nearby private schools.

Capturing “Competitive Pressure”

In this study, the authors use an index of five measures to capture “competitive pressure” in an area:

- 1) The number of private schools surrounding a public school;
- 2) The distance between a public school and the private schools that surrounds it;
- 3) The different types of religious schools that surround a public school;
- 4) The number of students enrolled in nearby private schools that are in the same grades that a public school serves;
- 5) The number of houses of worship within a five-mile radius of a school.



FINDINGS

Academic Outcomes

What did the authors find? *As public schools in Florida are more exposed to private school choice, public school students experience lower rates of suspension and absences and higher standardized test scores in reading and math. The students most likely to benefit from these impacts are comparatively low socio-economic status, but the gains for higher SES students are also statistically significant.*^{iv}

The authors also find a relationship between the number and density of private schools in a community and outcomes for students in the local school district. In communities with more private school options than the median (more competitive pressure) and a 10% increase in the number of students who use the scholarship, public school students experience an associated increase in combined math and reading scores. Test scores also improve in communities with “lower degrees” of competitive pressure, but the improvements are not as pronounced.^v

Behavioral Outcomes

Behavioral outcomes improve, too. In both high and low competitive pressure environments, there were associated reductions in suspensions and absences. The greatest reductions occurred in areas with more competition.

A demographic breakdown of the findings is also telling. Although African-American and white students experienced similar test score gains, African-American students did not experience significant behavioral benefits. This suggests that even in competitive environments, African American students may still be subject to harsher disciplinary practices in public schools. Hispanic students were most likely to experience a reduction in suspensions. They also experienced the largest gains of any group in reading^{vi}.

CONCLUSION

How does this study enhance our understanding of the impacts of private school choice? The authors don't claim that the growth of the FTC *caused* improved academic and behavioral outcomes for students in public schools. They acknowledge that the FTC was one of many reforms that Florida implemented at the turn-of-the-century. (It's difficult to disentangle the effects of one reform from another). However, this study provides compelling evidence that private school choice doesn't harm students who remain in public schools. Rather, in this case, the competitive pressure that comes with increased options for families seems to benefit all students, especially the most vulnerable. When more students achieve, everyone wins.

ⁱ Figlio, Hart, & Karbownick (2020) “Effects of Scaling Up Private School Choice Programs on Public School Students,” National Bureau for Economic Research, Working Paper 26758, p. 3

ⁱⁱ Figlio, Hart & Karbownick, p. 3.

ⁱⁱⁱ Figlio, Hart & Karbownick, p. 11.

^{iv} Figlio, Hart & Karbownick, p. 5.

^v Figlio, Hart & Karbownick, p. 15.

^{vi} Figlio, Hart & Karbownick, p. 17.