

Becoming America's 'Education Destination'

How Universal Scholarships Can Brighten Florida's Future



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An exodus is underway from New York City and its surrounding environs. Many members of the Jewish community are leaving the Big Apple and moving to the Sunshine State. And their migration to Florida – America's Promised Land – is being fueled in part by a very interesting factor: school choice.

"Many young families up north are enticed by Florida's robust menu of state-supported private-school scholarships," writes Allan Jacob in *The Wall Street Journal*. "These programs make private school tuition far more affordable in Florida than in New York and New Jersey."¹

Florida Trend magazine reports enrollment in Jewish Day Schools is on the rise.² And Mimi Jankovitz of Teach Florida says this is especially true in South Florida.³

"I've spoken to a lot of people from New York and New Jersey," says Eli Hagler of Brauser Maimonides Academy, a Jewish school in Fort Lauderdale that has seen its enrollment grow 15 percent in the last year. "Companies are going virtual and staying virtual, and so people are looking to get out."⁴

But they aren't all heading to areas of Florida with long-established Jewish communities. For example, Rabbi Yisrael Taussig and many of his followers left Brooklyn to start an orthodox community in a semi-rural area of central Florida. A number of other Jews have decided to join them, attracted to Florida's lower cost of living and more parent-friendly educational environment.⁵

Interestingly, Matt Ladner of *reimagined* reports a similar exodus is occurring out west, where many Jewish residents are leaving California and re-settling in Arizona. Ladner observes, "Again, the outflow comes from a high tax/cost state that provides no assistance to families seeking private education to a lower cost/taxed state which does."⁶

Now, at first blush, all of this "education migration" might seem like a mere curiosity, a peculiar phenomenon without any relevance beyond a relatively small sub-population.

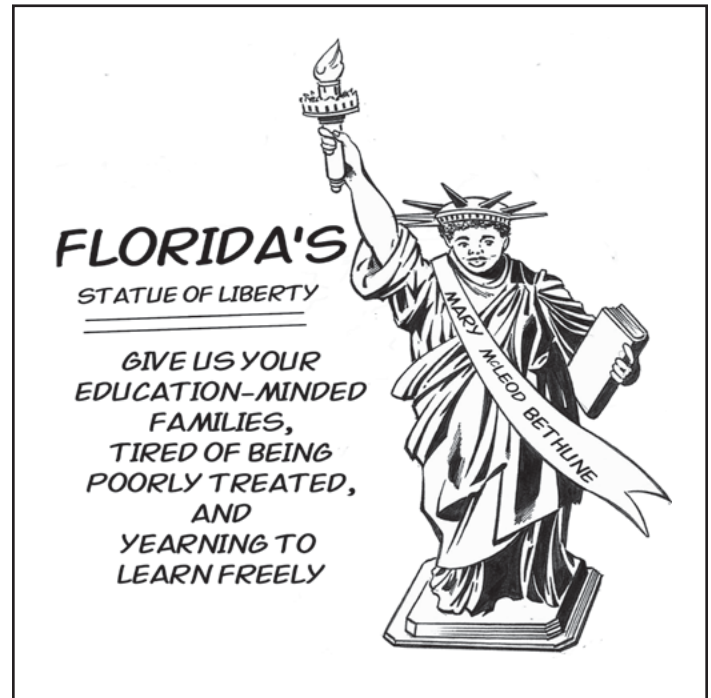
But there is reason to believe that something much more significant is happening here. There is reason to believe we are witnessing the beginning of a "new normal" in which many education-minded families move to freedom-loving states that facilitate parents' efforts to direct the education of their children.

In this new normal, Florida could easily become America's unrivaled "education destination," and enjoy the short- and long-term benefits of attracting education-minded parents (and their talented offspring) to the Sunshine State.

Moreover, as we will see, the in-migration of families that highly value education could have an especially positive effect on many areas of our state needing economic development or revitalization. This would make a positive phenomenon exponentially better.

To fully appreciate the opportunity now before us, it's important for Florida's leaders to understand four different research findings (briefly summarized here) which ought to inform future policy-making:

- **Many workers now have greater residential flexibility than ever before.** Thanks in part to successful COVID-related experiments in remote work, many people are now less tethered to a central work site and can live in places that are beyond a daily commuting distance. Moreover, some "digital nomads" can now work and live almost anywhere they want.
- **Even before the pandemic, considerable pent-up demand for wider education options existed.** For many years, national parental preference surveys have shown that less than 40 percent of all parents view public schooling as the optimal education environment for their children (even though more than three-quarters of all U.S. students regularly attend district schools).



- **Parental confidence in the public school system is weakening significantly.** Some leading pollsters say they have never seen anything like it. And this decline in parental confidence – and the corresponding rise in support for education choice – has been particularly striking among “PTA Moms” and other highly-engaged parents.
- **Property values typically increase in less-affluent areas when universal private school scholarship programs are adopted.** This may seem counter-intuitive; but a number of case studies show that when education opportunities are no longer tied to school zoning considerations, many middle-income households choose to live in areas that historically have had a hard time attracting or retaining upwardly-mobile families.

This report takes a closer look at each of these research findings – and their implications for K-12 education policy here in Florida. We begin by examining the relationship between education options and housing decisions, because this very compelling research helps lay the foundation for a new economic growth strategy: using school choice as a magnet for drawing education-minded families to our state.

How Education Options Affect Housing Decisions

Even though he does not always drink Dos Equis, Bart Daniels is quite possibly the Most Interesting Man in the World of Education Policy today. Or at least the Most Unlikely Man. Daniels is a business school professor at North Carolina State University who specializes in real estate. He's an expert in housing patterns, not pedagogical practices. And when Daniels isn't fielding questions about finance (as the author of a best-selling textbook on the topic), the University of Florida alum is often exploring ways to spur new development in communities that desperately need economic revitalization.

Which is how Daniels first got interested in education choice.

Several years ago, Daniels began seeing a pattern that he found extremely interesting: when localities adopted school choice scholarships offering universal eligibility, they experienced significant economic improvement, particularly in less affluent neighborhoods. That's because universal school choice scholarships removed an anchor weighing down distressed parts of town – the requirement that all families living there must attend the local public school (or else forfeit access to the per-pupil funding available for their children's education).

Removing this anchor made these less affluent areas more attractive to middle-income parents. As a result, upwardly-mobile families with historic ties to the neighborhood increasingly chose to live there. As did couples that had purchased a starter home in the community who didn't want to uproot and start all over somewhere else. The increase in the stable, middle-income population meant that these once-distressed areas could now attract new businesses (banks, grocery stores, etc.) and more jobs to their side of town.

The fact that *universal* scholarships disproportionately benefit *less-affluent* neighborhoods may seem counterintuitive. But freeing middle-income parents to consider living in more affordable areas (via school choice scholarships) leads to greater economic diversity in neighborhood housing patterns.

As the sidebar on pages 4-5 explains in greater detail, Daniels's research confirms something every suburban realtor has long surmised: the most significant factor affecting middle-income housing decisions is not proximity to work – it is proximity to good schooling. The reason middle-income families care so much about location-location-location when they go to buy a home is because they are greatly concerned about their kids' education-education-education.

Indeed, Daniels reports, "Many middle-income families who

currently move to the suburbs when their children reach school age would remain in more diverse and convenient city environments if they had more educational options."⁷

Daniels's research has a number of important implications for state and local education policymakers – and for business, religious, and community leaders looking to revitalize economically-distressed areas. At the very least, this research strongly argues for expanding school choice scholarship eligibility to include *all* families living in what Daniels likes to call "ED Zones" (Economic Development Zones). It also argues for prioritizing these families over similarly situated families living elsewhere, at least until full school choice scholarships are available for everyone everywhere.

Moreover, Daniels's research argues for approaching school choice scholarship expansion with a sense of urgency, because neighborhood transformations typically do not occur overnight. And every day that lawmakers delay the expansion of scholarship eligibility to a wider population is a day that they (inadvertently) hinder the revitalization of neighborhoods that would benefit greatly from an increased number of stable, middle-income households like the Edwards family (featured in the sidebar on page 7).

Spurring Neighborhood Revitalization – and Statewide Economic Development

While it is exciting to think about all the neighborhood revitalization that universal "ED Zone Scholarships" could help stimulate, there is an even more provocative implication of Daniels's research. Especially in the "new normal" that has arisen in the wake of COVID. And that is this:

If universal school choice scholarships are an effective tool for making certain neighborhoods more appealing to education-minded families, would it not follow that universal school choice scholarships could also be an effective tool for making certain *states* more appealing to education-minded families?

Or, to put it differently, if a state were interested in attracting families that highly value education to come and live there, wouldn't universal school choice scholarships be a good magnet to draw them?

In many regards, this "state" question has never been worth pondering in the past. Yes, parents care about education-education-education when it comes to deciding where to live. And, yes,

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How School Choice Scholarships Improve Property Values in Targeted Neighborhoods

BY BART DANIELSEN

More than 60 years ago, geographer Charles Tiebout (1956) theorized that assigning schools to students based on their home address would eventually result in “spatial sorting” that segregates neighborhoods based on family income. He surmised that neighborhoods with wealthier families would enjoy better public schools and greater economic vitality which would be reflected in higher property values. Poor families would end up concentrated in low-income neighborhoods with lower-quality public schools.

Economists refer to the eventual result as an “equilibrium” because a neighborhood’s quality determines the quality of its assigned schools while the quality of the neighborhood’s assigned schools, in turn, reinforces the quality of the neighborhood. Absent a disruption to this system, the equilibrium will persist.

Over many decades, much empirical research has confirmed Tiebout’s theory that families choose neighborhoods based on public school quality, and that home prices are linked to the quality of assigned schools. Informally, real estate professionals often refer to this phenomenon as families “voting with their feet.”

After this empirical research first emerged, social equity concerns quickly arose over the implications of wealthy families moving to neighborhoods with good schools while poorer families were left behind in weaker schools. These concerns about equity were particularly pronounced in situations where schools are funded through local property taxes because already-weak schools then receive less funding as well. Policies that decouple school funding from local property values have now been implemented in most states to address this problem. However, a school’s funding level is not the only variable – or even the most important variable – that affects school quality and neighborhood property values. Non-financial factors such as parental oversight, teacher quality, and peer influences significantly impact assigned school quality – and thus neighborhood sorting and property values. These issues cannot be fully addressed by adjusting per-student funding.

In the late 1990s, researchers began to explore how school choice programs might undermine the spatial sorting that school assignments create. Nechyba (1999) developed a model simulating an environment where families are assigned to schools based on neighborhood residency, but with a taxpayer-funded universal

voucher system serving as a parallel education system. Nechyba’s model predicted that universal vouchers would reduce disparities in income, family wealth, and property values across neighborhoods. Universal vouchers would spur more affluent families to live in neighborhoods with lower housing costs, leading to greater neighborhood diversity.

Subsequent papers by Nechyba and others found similar results could be obtained using universal vouchers targeted only in lower-income neighborhoods – but they found that means-tested voucher programs (in which vouchers are only offered to lower-income families) *do not reduce* neighborhood stratification. When higher-income families are excluded from a voucher program,

their incentives are unaffected, and they continue to seek out assigned schools in higher-priced neighborhoods where higher-quality schools are found.

In recent years, three empirical studies have examined the actual, rather than theoretical, effects of universal (not-means-tested) private school choice programs on housing values. Interestingly, one of these case studies involved rural areas and small towns,

another focused on a suburban community, and the third looked at an urban area. Each of these studies found that the scholarship program raised housing values in the affected areas:

Vermont. Vermont has a school voucher program that it refers to as the “tuitioning system.” Tuitioning has existed in Vermont since 1869. The state has over 200 townships which operate public elementary, middle, and high schools, sometimes jointly with other nearby townships. More than 90 of these townships, however, do not operate an assigned school for some grades; and a few townships have no public school at all. In these instances, the township offers the tuitioning program to its residents.

Under tuitioning, families are allowed to choose a private or public school of their choice, and the township funds the child’s education. Some students use the tuitioning system to attend schools outside Vermont. In fact, some children along Vermont’s northern border have even tuitioned into Canadian schools.

Interestingly, tuitioning townships have relatively high numbers of school-age children when compared with non-tuitioning townships, suggesting that families with children prefer to live in tuitioning districts. Conversations with Vermont real estate agents confirm this preference. Moreover, Cannon, Danielsen and Har-

■ Poorly performing public schools did not drag down the surrounding neighborhood when an outside voucher option was accessible.

rison (2015) examined the impact of Vermont's tuitioning system on real estate values across the state and found "robust evidence that school voucher programs increase home values.... All else equal, the authors show that the housing market is willing to pay a premium of nearly 5.7 percent for homes within a tuition town."

On a few occasions, depopulating rural townships have voted to close their public school and switch to the tuitioning system. In each case, in-migration of families with school-age children has followed. For example, the New Caledonian Record published a 2015 article touting the fact that "School Choice Leads to Real Estate Boom."

San Antonio, Texas. Merrifield et.al. (2011) found similar results in a low-income suburban San Antonio Texas school district. In 1998, a private sponsor donated \$52.4 million to the Edgewood Independent School District to fund a voucher system. The program allowed Edgewood students to attend the public or private school of their choice. The average voucher was \$4,700 and parents were allowed to add to this amount if the cost of private schooling exceeded the size of their voucher. The donating sponsor's funding was designed to be a catalyst: once the funds were exhausted, the sponsor would not replenish them.

In the early years of the program, Edgewood home values rose by 9.9 percent relative to surrounding neighborhoods; and new construction rose to meet increased housing demand. When the program's funding ran out, however, property values declined. Once families could no longer send their child to the school of their choice, many left the neighborhood.

Paris, France. Paris has a long-standing state-funded voucher program that operates alongside government-operated schools. Most of the voucher-funded schools are Catholic. Although the city's voucher program is theoretically available to all Parisians, new voucher-accepting schools have not been allowed to open for many years. Some areas of the city have no voucher-funded schools to attend, so the right to use a voucher means very little in these places. Other neighborhoods in the city have multiple voucher-funded school options available. The right to use a voucher is real and meaningful in these places.

Fack and Grenet (2010) studied the impact of voucher-funded middle schools on Paris property values. In France, middle school is particularly important because high stakes testing as well as the quality of the student's middle school determines whether students are admitted to academically-selective high schools. Others may be diverted into vocational training programs.

In their research, Fack and Grenet made two major findings:

- In areas where families effectively lacked school choice (because they lived a considerable distance from voucher-accepting private schools), public school quality had a profound impact on home values; but
- In areas where families enjoyed easy access to voucher-accepting private schools, poor-quality public schools had *no negative effect on property values*.

Where private school options were most available, public school quality ceased to produce any statistically discernable impact on the surrounding neighborhood, at least as measured by property values. Put another way, poorly performing schools did not drag down the surrounding neighborhood when an outside voucher option was accessible.

Lessons for Policymakers Interested in Economic Development

1. Education choice programs that are means-tested will have little or no impact on community growth and development and will not reduce economic segregation across neighborhoods.
2. Universal-eligibility programs will help stimulate economic development in low-income areas, especially when these non-means-tested programs are targeted to neighborhoods needing economic revitalization.
3. A universal education choice program does not need to replace an existing program for the economic development effects to arise. It can be layered on top of any other programs that already exist.
4. A properly structured scholarship program should generate positive economic development effects, regardless of the geographic setting (whether rural, suburban, or urban).
5. Discontinued scholarships and rules that create uncertainty about future eligibility or funding will lessen, or even reverse, economic development gains.

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they are often willing to commute considerable distances to work to get better schooling options for their kids. But parents tethered to a central worksite can only commute so far. Consequently, prior to COVID, virtually all state-based economic “recruitment” focused on convincing employers to relocate their businesses or to open new plants in one’s state.

But the pandemic changed all that. COVID taught many companies that they can achieve greater efficiencies by facilitating remote work. And COVID has convinced many workers that they can enjoy a better quality of life by working remotely. In fact, a 2021 *New York Times* survey found that nearly a third of all workers (31 percent) want to work at home full time going forward – and another 24 percent want to split time between a home office and a central office.⁸

Given their positive experiences with remote work during the pandemic, many tech giants and other information-based companies have already made permanent changes to embrace more flexible work arrangements. And in the 2021 study, *The Future of Work after COVID-19*, a team of McKinsey analysts project that 20 to 25 percent of the labor force could work from home between three and five days a week without any loss of productivity. “This represents four to five times more remote work than before the pandemic,” according to McKinsey, “and could prompt a large change in the geography of work, as individuals and companies shift out of large cities into suburbs and small cities.” Sometimes in completely different states.⁹

Needless to say, Florida is extremely well-positioned to take advantage of this shift in “the geography of work.” As a recent *Forbes* analysis observed, “When remote work means there’s no longer any reason to live in a high-priced, cold-weather big city, the appeal of sprawling yards, proximity to beaches and warm sunshine is undeniable.”¹⁰

Of course, many jobs cannot be performed remotely. And even those that can be done remotely won’t always be done at a distance. But Florida doesn’t need – or want – everyone to move here. Nor do we want people to move here indiscriminately. Indeed, some Florida leaders are understandably worried about the potential “Californication” of the Sunshine State if too many newcomers bring with them the flawed ideas and approaches that have ruined other states.

So, to the extent that the role of a governor is like that of a business or college recruiter, what sorts of “recruits” should we most want to encourage to come here? The answer should be obvious: People who greatly appreciate the freedoms we enjoy here in Florida – and will pass down to their children this deep appreciation for liberty.

Which brings us to the next set of research findings.

The Pent-Up Demand for Wider Education Options

For many years, EdChoice has been measuring parental attitudes and practices in K-12 education throughout America. Among other things, its researchers periodically measure parental preferences in education – and then compare these numbers to actual enrollment practices. These comparisons provide a rough gauge to assess just how well (or how poorly) lawmakers are facilitating access to their constituents’ preferences.

Over the years, EdChoice’s survey results have been remarkably consistent – and very discouraging. “Most American school parents aren’t accessing the educational options they say they prefer for their children,” EdChoice reports.¹¹

In fact, the “education preference gap” typically exceeds 40 percent. That is, at least two in five families report that their children are educated in a sub-optimal setting rather than in the type of school parents would most prefer.

As Table 1 indicates, EdChoice’s 2021 in-depth summer survey found that only 34 percent of all parents regard public schooling as their optimal form of education; yet 75 percent of all K-12 students nationwide currently attend a district public school.¹² Conversely, for every family currently enrolled in a private school (10 percent), there are three more who would like to be.

Table 1. Parents’ Optimal Preferences

If it were your decision and you could select any type of school, and financial costs and transportation were of no concern, what type of school would you select in order to obtain the best education for your child?

Parents	
Charter School	13%
Home School	13%
Private School [or Independent School, Parochial School, Religious School]	40%
Regular Public School [or District School]	34%

Source: 2021 *Schooling in America* Questionnaire

Taken together, more than half (53 percent) of all parents wish their family could afford to homeschool or send their children to a private school. And when those preferring charter schools are added to the mix, two of every three families would like for their

Good Families Make Good Neighbors

When Harold and Talethia Edwards bought a house in Tallahassee's Bond Community more than a dozen years ago, they figured it would just be a starter home. Then, the Great Recession hit, setting back their financial plans (but not their quest to have a large family). And along the way, Harold and Talethia grew to deeply love their neighbors and to appreciate the special place their family occupies in the Bond Community.

For Talethia, a pivotal moment came when she attended a city government meeting on sustainability. The presentation focused on "green" ideas that every household and neighborhood ought to adopt. Yet, as Talethia pondered the word "sustainability" in relation to her neighborhood, her mind went elsewhere. "For our community to see any *sustainable* improvement," she thought, "we will need more households like mine to come in and fill the abandoned houses and empty lots."

Now, when Talethia says "households like mine," she isn't claiming to be anything special. Or trying to put her family on a pedestal.

But others might do so.

In fact, several years ago, a new mom in their community was so overwhelmed by the task of caring for her child alone that she literally left the baby on the Edwards' doorstep with a request that they raise it.

Which meant that the Edwards family became a household of 10!

That's right, Harold and Talethia have seven biological children of their own. And to hear them describe these kids is a veritable delight.

There's the musical son who plays five instruments. The studious daughter who skipped a grade and now tries to hide her age from her International Baccalaureate classmates. The flower child who makes up songs as she paints. The athletic kid who wants to start a chess club at his classical school. The spicy little sis who gets restless if she feels chained to a desk. The witty drama queen who wants to wear "sparkly clothes" instead of school uniforms.

And then there's the preteen son who scored 159 on an IQ test and someday hopes to find the solution to one of the six remaining math problems no one has ever been able to solve. A scholar at Florida State University's famous "Mag Lab" is interested in helping mentor this boy's academic development.

Which is one of the reasons Talethia supports Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) that parents can use to fund a wide array of educational opportunities, including unique one-on-one mentoring arrangements.

Talethia believes expanding eligibility for ESA scholarships would make them more useful to many families. And she believes making scholarships available to all those living in "ED Zones" would help her area attract more intact, middle-income households like her own.

Importantly, Talethia sees no conflict between her school choice advocacy and Harold's position as a high school teacher in a Title 1 public school. "We care deeply about the quality of our local public schools," Talethia says. "We just want parents to have the freedom to do what is best for each child."

—William Mattox

children to be educated in something other than a district public school.¹³

These results may come as a surprise to some, given that suburban public schooling is sometimes presented as an "idyllic" option for which most parents pine. Clearly, that is not the case. Indeed, if various schooling options were male contestants on "The Bachelorette," suburban public schooling would more often be "Mr. Fall-back Option" or "Mr. Back-Up Plan" rather than "Prince Charming" or "Mr. Right."

None of this is meant to trash public schools. Or to suggest that they invariably leave most of their parents dissatisfied. In the same way that college applicants who have to settle for a "safety school" often go on to wear their school's colors and to root for its teams, roughly half of the families who enroll their children in public

schools (despite viewing it as a suboptimal choice) appear to be mostly satisfied.

EdChoice reports that 50 percent of all parents would give their local schools a grade of "A" or "B." This is significantly higher than the proportion who regard public schools as their optimal choice (34 percent); but it is also significantly lower than the proportion whose children are enrolled in public schools (75 percent).¹⁴

So, the pent-up demand for wider education options in America is quite large. And it can probably best be seen in this fact: Roughly one in four parents currently has a child enrolled in a public school yet does not believe their local schools merit a grade above "C." Moreover, some who give their local schools higher grades would still prefer some other option.¹⁵

Why, then, have legislators in many states been so slow to re-

spond to this pent-up demand and expand school choice options? There are many reasons, some of which are nefarious and related to protecting “systemic privilege” (the position of “privilege” the public school “system” enjoys over other options, as the back page sidebar explains).

But one of the factors contributing to the mismatch between parental preferences and enrollment patterns is a “critical mass” problem separate and apart from funding. That is, conventional schools need a certain “critical mass” of students to be successful. When there aren’t enough families in a geographic area to support a particular type of schooling, those who consider that type of schooling to be optimal must settle for something else.

As the rise of remote work untethers some parents from central worksites for all or part of the typical workweek, this will free some families to move to areas that have the kind of schooling options they most prefer. Even if that means crossing state lines to take advantage of more parent-friendly K-12 education policies.

Parental Confidence in the Public School System is Weakening

In addition to measuring parents’ optimal preferences, EdChoice also regularly takes the pulse of Americans to assess whether they believe K-12 education is generally moving in a positive or a negative direction. Since the appearance of COVID, the trendline for Americans in general, and for parents in particular, has shifted roughly six to seven percentage points in a negative direction. In fact, as Table 2 shows, a 2021 fall survey found that 55 percent of all parents believe K-12 education is now “off on the wrong track.”¹⁶

Table 2: Is K-12 Education Going in the Right Direction?

In the United States, do you feel things in K-12 Education are generally going in the right direction, or do you feel things have generally gotten off on the wrong track?

	Parents
Right Direction	44%
Wrong Track	55%

Source: 2021 Schooling in America Questionnaire

A number of factors have contributed to parents’ growing concerns about the direction of K-12 education. In the early of days of COVID, many found that their local schools were ill-prepared to teach online and often slow to open their schools for in-person learning.

In addition, some parents working from home got a window into their children’s daily assignments and became concerned about the content – and age-appropriateness – of certain lessons. A number of high-profile skirmishes over critical race theory and gender identity issues have added fuel to these concerns.

More recently, as students around the country have returned to in-person learning, new concerns have arisen over mask mandates (or the lack thereof), vaccine requirements, and quarantining policies.

Needless to say, it’s been a challenging time for everyone involved in K-12 education. But many Americans perceive that private schools and “DIY” innovations (like pod learning and hybrid homeschools) have served students better during COVID.

Not surprisingly, parental support for all forms of education choice has risen to record levels in the wake of COVID. Moreover, EdChoice reported last fall that “ESA support is at an all-time high in our survey project’s eight-year history.”¹⁷ And support for ESAs has remained steady since. (See Table 3.)

Table 3. Parental Support for Education Savings Accounts (ESAs)

An “education savings account” in K-12 education – **often called an ESA** – establishes for parents a government-authorized savings account with restricted, but multiple uses for educational purposes. Parents can then use these funds to pay for: school tuition; tutoring; online education programs; therapies for students with special needs; textbooks or other instructional materials; or save for future college expenses. In general, do you favor or oppose an ESA system?

[PROBE:] Would that be strongly or somewhat?

	Parents
NET: FAVOR	84%
Strongly Favor	38%
Somewhat Favor	46%
NET: OPPOSE	16%
Somewhat Oppose	11%
Strongly Oppose	4%
No Answer/Don’t Know/Refused	1%

Source: 2021 Schooling in America Questionnaire

“Never in my lifetime have so many parents been so eager for so much education change,” says longtime pollster Frank Luntz.¹⁸ And one of the most striking things about the shift in public attitudes is how deeply some highly-engaged parents feel betrayed by public school officials. Indeed, parents’ comments read at times like entries in a teen girl’s diary after a bad break up, with Taylor Swift blaring in the background, “We are Never Ever Getting Back Together.” Consider:

“I moved from being ‘fine with’ charter schools and against private school vouchers to now supporting both,” a Michigan parent told *The New York Times*. “It pains me to say this, but I no longer feel my public school system has my child’s education as its highest priority.”¹⁹

A Philadelphia single mom echoed those sentiments. “The more we see, the more faith we lose in our system,” she told the *Times*.²⁰

And perhaps nowhere has parental sentiment turned against local officials more than in Loudoun County, Virginia, where the School Board covered up a very troubling incident in a girls’ bathroom in which a student (who sometimes wears a skirt to school) sexually assaulted a 9th grade girl. “People are mistrustful and angry for good reason,” writes Guy Benson of *Town Hall*. “This episode helps illustrate why schools and education have become red hot issues.”²¹

How Florida Leaders Should Respond

Now that there are many upwardly mobile families with children who can more easily relocate than in the past, Florida’s Governor and legislative leadership ought to put out the welcome mat and invite all those who are uninspired by their current (lack of) schooling options to move to Florida where they can enjoy more education choice than anywhere in the country.

Our state’s economic development leaders ought to join this effort in urging education-minded families with children to move here – much as they recruit major corporations to build new plants or relocate in Florida. Protestant and Catholic school leaders in our state ought to do the same, tapping into their national and regional networks, much as Florida’s Jewish community has been doing. And cities and towns looking for ways to attract new talent to their local economies ought to look for ways to position their locales as “education destinations” that are parent-friendly and DIY-learning friendly.

Indeed, one of the most promising education trends (to which

COVID has greatly contributed) is the growing interest in pod learning, micro-schools, hybrid homeschooling, and other “DIY” education innovations that usually require only a small number of families. These education innovations can work well in small towns and rural communities where “critical mass” can be a daunting challenge for traditional “macro school” alternatives to overcome.

■ Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis ought to put out the welcome mat and invite all those families who are uninspired by their current (lack of) schooling options to move to Florida where they can enjoy more education choice than anywhere in the country.

State legislators ought to help facilitate greater “education migration” by expanding the eligibility of existing scholarship programs so that income restrictions do not discourage affluent families from coming to Florida (and contributing to our tax base!).

Given the fact that the existing Hope Scholarship has no means test, and the fact that many legislators already want to expand its coverage to address several new concerns, Florida policymakers should consider making Hope a universal scholarship available to any Florida student. This could be done without undermining the scholarship’s original purpose. Indeed, legislators could offer “first dibs” to certain groups (including all those currently covered by Hope) to ensure that they receive the scholarship assistance they need. In addition, legislators could retain current funding levels for those in priority groups, while offering a less-generous scholarship amount for all other students.

Florida already provides differential funding in certain situations. For example, students enrolled in full-time virtual education currently receive a lower per-pupil allotment than those attending in-person classes. The logic for this is that since virtual education is a more cost-efficient mode of education, Florida taxpayers ought to be able to keep the savings.

A similar logic could be applied to an expanded Hope Scholarship with weighted funding, especially if legislators were to convert it into an Education Savings Account (since ESAs generate greater cost-efficiencies). Converting the Hope Scholarship to an ESA would have great appeal because ESAs foster innovation. They can accommodate an almost-limitless array of schooling variations. And they arguably provide greater protection to faith-based families than any other instrument because they so clearly underscore the fact that the funding goes to the parent – and not to a religious school directly.

What’s more, ESAs are easier for families to use in situations where there are no schools that take tuition vouchers. This may help to explain why support for ESAs is particularly strong among families in small towns, according to EdChoice.²²

ESAs are also better able to absorb a significant influx of new students because they can be used in all sorts of “micro” and “hy-

brid” arrangements that do not have the brick-and-mortar challenges of big schools. So, ESAs allow our state to keep up with the growing demand for education alternatives.

Where would all of these proposed changes leave us? With a universal Hope Scholarship ESA offering close to \$8,000 a year in scholarship assistance to those in priority groups and nearly \$6,000 a year to all other interested Floridians.

Would there be any other students that ought to be added to the priority population getting the full \$8,000 scholarship? Yes. One group in particular – those who choose to live in the (rural or urban) areas needing revitalization that Bart Danielsen likes to call “ED Zones.”

Providing (additional) weighted funding to those living in ED Zones would encourage middle-income families to help rebuild communities that often need more than just infusions of cash and improvements to infrastructure. Indeed, many of these communities need Scout leaders and Little League coaches and Neighborhood Watch coordinators and church volunteers. They need more neighbors like the Edwards family (featured on page 7). And, like the (churchgoing)Edwards, many of the families who most want the freedom to direct the education of their children are the same sort of people who often invest themselves heavily in their communities.

So, including all families living in ED Zones in the priority group for weighted scholarship funding makes a lot of sense. It extends to school choice scholarships the same logic behind Title I funding (which benefits all the students in a low-income neighborhood – even those who aren’t poor). And it is apt to be more successful at spurring middle-income participation in community development than placing charter or magnet schools in poor neighborhoods (because these strategies only encourage more diverse schools, they don’t address the need for more economically-diverse neighborhoods).

Lest there be any doubt, universal scholarships enjoy wide public support. As Table 4 shows, 81 percent of U.S. parents believe that all families should be eligible for education choice scholarships, in the same way that all families are eligible to enroll in public schools.²³ And since affluent families contribute more to the tax base than others, the last thing we should be doing is discouraging their migration to our state.

Table 4: Support for Universal Scholarships, Regardless of Income

Some people believe that ESAs should be available to all families, regardless of incomes and special needs. Do you agree or disagree with that statement?

[PROBE:] Would that be strongly or somewhat... ?

	Parents
NET: AGREE	81%
Strongly Agree	42%
Somewhat Agree	39%
NET: DISAGREE	18%
Somewhat Disagree	13%
Strongly Disagree	5%
No Answer/Don't Know/Refused	1%

Source: 2021 Schooling in America Questionnaire

Conclusion

Florida is in a great position to become America’s premier “education destination.” We already possess the nation’s largest and most impressive school choice program. We already have an existing education choice infrastructure that can accommodate newcomers. And we already have an entrepreneurial spirit that fosters innovation – and regularly improves our scholarship programs to help more parents find the optimal education for their children.

Maybe someday more states will get around to listening to the frustrations of their education-minded parents and will (finally) address their pent-up demand for education choice. In the meantime, Florida ought to welcome every American family looking for education freedom.

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Overcoming 'Systemic Privilege'

TALLAHASSEE -- Throughout America, a very important – and highly racialized – conversation is taking place about overcoming injustice. Here in Florida, that conversation has often gone in a markedly different and very promising direction. And school-children of color are among the greatest beneficiaries.

The conversation in Florida, at least as it pertains to education, has focused on what might be called “systemic privilege.”

If you are unfamiliar with this (de-racialized) mash-up term, try this: Go to a public forum and suggest that all families should be treated fairly – that all parents should have access to the per-pupil funds for their children even if they choose to educate them outside the public school system.

Then, watch the defenders of “systemic privilege” come out of the woodwork.

“You want to take money out of the public school *system*,” they’ll say. “We should be spending more on the public school *system*, not on school choice alternatives for students outside the *system*.”

To the defenders of “systemic privilege,” the *system* is more important than the students. And the people who benefit from the *system*’s privileged position matter more than the families trapped within its coercive tentacles.

Thankfully, here in Florida, a bipartisan (and multi-ethnic) coalition of leaders has been working to end “systemic privilege.” Over the last two decades, they have succeeded in adopting education choice policies that enable low- and middle-income parents to find the learning environment that best meets their children’s unique needs, aptitudes, and interests.

As a consequence, nearly half (48 percent) of all Florida K-12 students currently attend something other than their zoned public school. And the Florida Legislature just passed a measure adding 61,000 students to Florida’s K-12 scholarship rolls.

Lest there be any doubt, Florida still has some work to do – in

education and in other areas. But the Sunshine State has done more to end “systemic privilege” than any other state. And Florida students are greatly benefitting.

In fact, *Education Week* now ranks Florida #3 in the nation in K-12 student achievement. A research team from Harvard and Stanford found that, over the last quarter-century, Florida students showed greater learning gains than the students in all but one other state (even though Florida increased per-pupil spending less than every other state!). And a recent study found that the (mostly minority) students in Florida’s largest school choice scholarship program are more likely to go to college – and to graduate – than their public school peers.

So, the future is bright for Florida’s students –and not just for those taking advantage of Florida’s new learning options. In fact, a recent National Bureau of Economic Research study found Florida public school students showed significant academic improvement after school choice was adopted (presumably because greater competition spurred greater public school achievement).

In other words, Florida’s rising tide of education choice is lifting all boats. And while ending “systemic privilege” in K-12 education is not the only “justice” issue Americans should be concerned about, no other policy reform is apt to do more to alter the trajectory of the next generation than education choice.

During the civil rights era, the city of Atlanta used to boast that it was *The City Too Busy to Hate*. Considering its remarkable success in K-12 education, Florida now probably ought to be known as *The State Too Busy Creating Bright Futures for All Our Students to Let Haters Divide Us Along Racial Lines*.

Which may just be another way of saying, once again, that Florida is the Sunshine State.

— *William Mattox*



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