Victory Report: Education Markets

How Florida Transformed its Public Education System

Executive Summary

Florida implemented school choice gradually over the course of more than 20 years, first through the expansion of charter schools and rigorous quality control measures, and eventually through Education Savings Accounts (ESA) for low-income families, which are now universal.

> ***Combining competitive and governmental pressures through education markets and school grading made Florida one of the top five states for K-12 education.***

The massive expansion of charter schools—which are free, publicly funded schools that generally use a lottery system to admit students—began in the late 1990s. Education reform in this period also included an A-F grading system for schools, performance-based teacher bonuses, and the mandatory retention of third grade students who were unable to read (with exceptions).

Low-income and predominantly minority districts made the most significant gains and saw the most competitive pressure from public charters. Florida's public charter schools (which serve 69% minority students and 53% low-income students statewide), if treated as their own state, would rank No. 2 in 4th grade reading, No. 1 in 8th grade reading, and tie for No. 2 in 4th grade math. In U.S. News and World Report's 2025 education rankings, Florida ranked 22nd in the nation for K-12 education and first for higher education.

The state's ESA program gradually expanded throughout the 2010s before becoming universal in 2023, at which point all students became eligible for about $8,000 ESAs toward the school of their choice. This funding has largely gone to families already enrolled in private schools because they work as restricted-use savings accounts for government funds that can be used for school tuition and other fees. Universal ESAs have been costly for the state and have created logistical challenges; while these accounts address concerns about fairness, there is more work to be done to make Florida's education market as robust as it can be.

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