

Schools Without Rules: An Orlando Sentinel Investigation

Florida private schools rake in nearly \$1 billion in state scholarships with little oversight.

Part 1 of 3 Parts

By Leslie Postal, Beth Kassab and Annie Martin
Staff Writers

P rivate schools in Florida will collect nearly \$1 billion in state-backed scholarships this year through a system so weakly regulated that some

schools hire teachers without college degrees, hold classes in aging strip malls and falsify fire-safety and health records.

The limited oversight of Florida’s scholarship programs allowed a principal under investigation for molesting a student at his Brevard County school to open another school under a new name and still receive the money, an Orlando Sentinel investigation found.

Another Central Florida school received millions of dollars in scholarships, sometimes called school vouchers, for nearly a decade even though it repeatedly violated program rules, including hiring staff with criminal convictions.

How do they compare?

SOURCE: Orlando Sentinel Research

| | Public | Charter | Private |
|--|--------|---------|---------|
| Must give statewide standardized tests in math, reading, science and social studies and make scores public | ✓ | ✓ | ✗ |
| Receives a school letter grade from state | ✓ | ✓ | ✗ |
| Must report graduation rates | ✓ | ✓ | ✗ |
| Must follow Florida's academic standards | ✓ | ✓ | ✗ |
| Permitted to teach religious curriculum | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ |
| Mandatory 20-minute recess in elementary school* | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ |
| Teachers required to have bachelor's degree and Florida certification** | ✓ | ✓ | ✗ |
| Must make budgets public | ✓ | ✓ | ✗ |
| Must meet state building codes for schools | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ |

*The Sentinel found some private schools have limited outdoor space or don't have playgrounds.

**The statute allows teachers without a college degree so long as they have "special skills," etc.

Click on graphic to enlarge ((Adelaide Chen/Staff Artist))

Despite the problems, the number of children using Florida’s scholarship programs has more than tripled in the past decade to 140,000 students this year at nearly 2,000 private schools. If students using Florida Tax Credit, McKay and Gardiner scholarships made up their own school district, they would be Florida’s sixth-largest in student population, just ahead of the Jacksonville area.

“The scholarships are good. The problem is the school,” said Edda Melendez, an Osceola County mother. “They need to start regulating the private schools.”

>>> Florida private schools: Readers share their experiences, views

Melendez complained to the state last year about a private school in Kissimmee. The school promised specialized help for her 5-year-old twin sons, who have autism, but one of their teachers was 21 years old and didn't have a bachelor's degree or experience with autistic children.

"I feel bad for all the parents who didn't know what's going on there," she told the state.



Jonathan, 5; Ryan, 9; and Jahdiel Ramos, 5, play as their mom Edda Melendez watches, at their Kissimmee home. ((Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda / Orlando Sentinel))

Last year, nearly a quarter of all state scholarship students — 30,000 — attended 390 private schools in Central Florida. The schools received \$175.6 million worth of the scholarships, which are for children from low-income families and those with disabilities.

During its investigation, the Sentinel visited more than 30 private schools in Orange, Seminole, Lake, Osceola and Brevard counties, reviewed thousands of pages of public records and interviewed dozens of parents, private school operators, state officials and policy experts.

Unlike public schools, private schools, including those that accept the state scholarships, operate free from most state rules. Private school teachers and principals, for example, are not required to have state certification or even college degrees.

One Orlando school, which received \$500,000 from the public programs last year, has a 24-year-old principal still studying at a community college.

Nor do private schools need to follow the state's academic standards. One curriculum, called Accelerated Christian Education or ACE, is popular in some private schools and requires students to sit at partitioned desks and fill out worksheets on their own for most of the day, with little instruction from teachers or interaction with classmates.

And nearly anything goes in terms of where private school classes meet. The Sentinel found scholarship students in the same office building as Whozz Next Bail Bonds on South Orange Blossom Trail, in a Colonial Drive day-care center that reeked of dirty diapers and in a school near Winter Park that was facing eviction and had wires dangling from a gap in the office ceiling and a library with no books, computers or furniture.

“

The scholarships are good. The problem is the school. They need to start regulating the private schools.

— Osceola County mother Edda Melendez

However, scholarships can be appealing because some private schools offer rigorous academics on modern campuses, unique programs or small classes that allow students more one-on-one attention, among other benefits. Bad experiences at public schools also fuel interest in scholarships.

Parents opting out of public schools often cite worries about large campuses, bullying, what they call inadequate services for special-needs children and state-required testing. Escaping high-stakes testing is such a scholarship selling point that one private school administrator refers to students as "testing refugees."

But the Sentinel found problems with Florida's programs, which make up the largest school voucher and scholarship initiative in the nation:

- ▶ At least 19 schools submitted documents since 2012 that misled state officials about fire or health inspections, including some with forged inspectors' names or altered dates. Eight of the schools still received scholarship money with the state's blessing.
- ▶ Upset parents sometimes complain to the state, assuming it has some say over academic quality at these private schools. It does not. "They can conduct their schools in the manner they believe to be appropriate," reads a typical response from the Florida Department of Education to a parent.
- ▶ The education department has stopped some schools from taking scholarships when they violated state rules, from the one in Fort Lauderdale led by a man convicted of stealing \$20,000 to a school in Gainesville caught depositing scholarship checks for students no longer enrolled. But the department often gives schools second chances and sometimes doesn't take action even when alerted to a problem.
- ▶ Florida's approach is so hands-off that a state directory lists private schools that can accommodate students with special needs — such as autism — without evidence the schools' staff is trained to handle disabilities.

Florida pioneered public school accountability

Robert Godin learned in late 2015 that a teacher at his son's school — Central Florida Preparatory School in west Orange County — had been terminated from a Seminole County public school years before for having pornography on his school computer. He didn't think the private school, where he sent his son using a state scholarship, should have hired a teacher who had been forced out of a public school and fined by the state.



Read all three parts of Schools Without Rules ([1](#))

Two other Central Florida private schools that take state scholarships had also hired the man, who no longer works at Central Florida Preparatory.

“If they’re getting money from the government, why would they not have the same requirements to hire as a public school?” Godin asked.

Attempts to reach Central Florida Preparatory for comment were unsuccessful.

The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, the largest of the three scholarship programs, pays private-school tuition for children from low-income families. The average family using the scholarship earns only about \$25,000 a year. The McKay and Gardiner scholarships pay for students with a wide range of disabilities.

Most of the state’s scholarships are worth from about \$6,300 to about \$10,000 per student. Gardiner and McKay are paid directly by the state. The tax-credit program is funded by donations from companies that receive dollar-for-dollar credits on their state tax bills, so it uses money that would otherwise go into Florida’s budget.

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If they're getting money from the government, why would they not have the same requirements to hire as a public school?

— Robert Godin, father

The state's Republican leaders started the first version of the scholarships nearly 20 years ago, which put Florida on the leading edge of a national movement to offer parents alternatives to their neighborhood schools. President Donald Trump and Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos visited a private school near Orlando in March to tout the benefits of the programs, with Trump saying he wanted to replicate Florida's "great success" nationwide.

Florida pioneered accountability for public schools with its A-to-F school grading system.

For private schools, though, the Legislature crafted the scholarship programs to operate with scant state oversight, endorsing a philosophy that the free market would sift out poor-quality schools.

Florida law, for example, limits to 10 the number of scholarship schools the state can visit each year, unless it checks on others with a history of problems. Last year, the state visited 22 of nearly 2,000 schools. The year before it visited 27 — and found only four compliant with all scholarship regulations.

SEARCH

Central Florida private schools that received vouchers

Searchable database: Find the Florida private schools that received vouchers and how much. ((Sentinel Graphic))

Scholarship laws also require private schools to hire only employees who pass criminal background checks, but they do not require the state to routinely check those records.

In recent years, while investigating other problems, the education department caught at least eight schools with staff members who had criminal records. One Osceola school was forced to fire its P.E. teacher and coach when the state discovered his record. But the man now works about a mile away, at another private school that takes scholarship students.

Supporters: Vouchers help students get 'high-quality' education

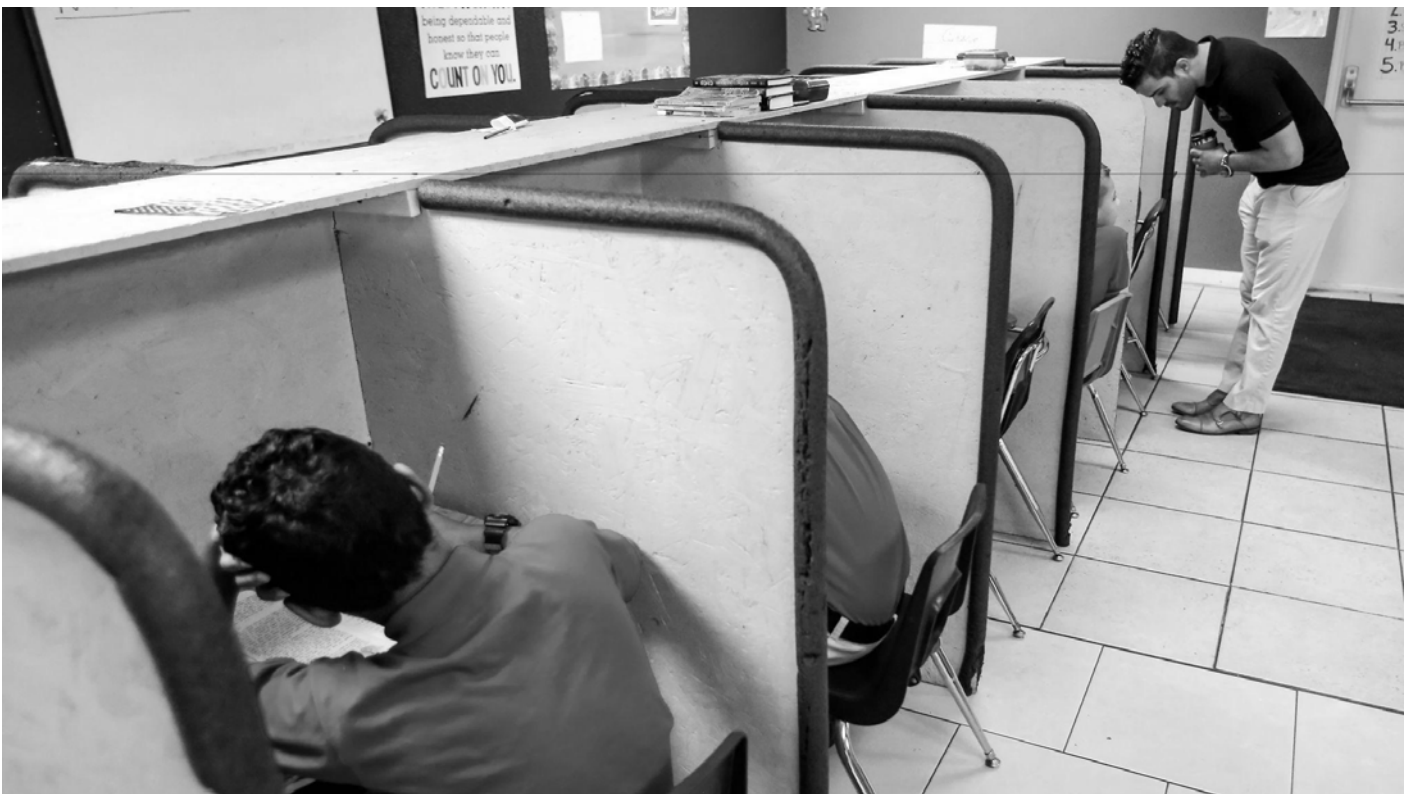
Supporters say the programs let parents choose schools they think are best for their children, helping kids who are struggling in public schools and giving poor families a way to afford private tuition.

“Families who opt for private school through any one of our scholarship programs have made the decision that best meets the needs of their students,” wrote Meghan Collins, a spokeswoman for the Florida Department of Education.

The department would not allow the Sentinel to interview Education Commissioner Pam Stewart or Adam Miller, head of its office of independent education and parental choice, which oversees the programs.

The department, Collins wrote via email, wants all Florida students to get a “high-quality education” and believes the scholarships help with that goal.

“We are able to really change these students’ lives, and I believe that would really be the highest standard of accountability that a school can have,” said Bryan Gonzalez, the 24-year-old principal of TDR Learning Academy in Orlando who is a student at Valencia College.



TDR Learning Academy principal Bryan Gonzalez speaks to a student at the school on Curry Ford Rd in Orlando. ((Jacob Langston / Orlando Sentinel))

The school, founded by a pastor and housed in a shopping center on Curry Ford Road, relied on scholarships for most of the nearly 100 students enrolled last year.

Like many of the Christian schools that take state scholarships, TDR uses one of a handful of popular curricula that, as one administrator explained, teach “traditional” math and reading but Bible-based history and science, including creationism.

TDR uses ACE, which includes workbooks for every subject. Students are to complete up to 70 a year. Gonzalez, the pastor’s son-in-law, said students benefit from doing ACE workbooks at their own pace.

Gonzalez also said parents don’t seem to mind his young age or that he and some TDR teachers lack college degrees. TDR’s enrollment has grown since it opened five years ago.

At Harvest Baptist Academy in Orlando’s Parramore neighborhood, parents choose the 20-year-old school for its academics, Bible-based lessons and no-nonsense discipline that includes spanking children, said Harry Amos, recently retired principal.

“The scholarships are fantastic,” Amos said.

All two dozen students at the school used them to pay tuition last year.

Parents “just want a different environment,” he said. “Our leader is the Lord Jesus.”



Harvest Baptist Christian Academy is a K-8 private school in Parramore. ((Jacob Langston / Orlando Sentinel))

About 78 percent of Florida’s scholarship students are enrolled in religious schools. Most are Christian schools, though some Jewish and Muslim schools take part, too.

St. Andrew Catholic School served as a backdrop for Trump’s visit. The Catholic schools are among some of the most well-regarded and long-established private schools that take Florida’s scholarships. Last year the Catholic Diocese of Orlando collected more than \$28 million through the public programs.

Not all private schools accept the state scholarships. Lake Highland Preparatory School and Trinity Preparatory School, for example, rely on their own financial aid programs.

The state allows many private schools to begin enrolling scholarship students as soon as they open their doors. Many rely on that funding for most of their income.

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Where did the money go? It didn't go to our student.

— Lake County parent Diana Highland, in a complaint to the state about a Zellwood private school

Schools must meet only a short list of state requirements, such as employee background checks and fire and health inspections, to receive the money. Such a low barrier to entry has helped the number of private schools in Florida to jump by more than 20 percent in the past 10 years.

Parents often don't realize how few checks there are of these schools.

“Where did the money go?” wrote Lake County parent Diana Highland in a complaint to the state, upset about a private school in Zellwood that abruptly shut down last year. “It didn't go to our student.”

Parents complain to the state about some schools

The complaints the Sentinel reviewed came from across Florida. A parent in Bradenton was upset a school assigned her eighth grader an elementary-level worksheet on clocks and telling time. Another was angry a North Florida school made students clean toilets as punishment. A Jacksonville mother wrote that her son's education was neglected. “They were paid \$10,316.00 for my son's tuition, and I have nothing to show for it,” she told the state.

In every case, the education department responded there was nothing it could do about a private school's academic choices.

But in the past five years, the education department did deny or revoke scholarship eligibility more than 60 times, with some schools sanctioned more than once, for violations of state rules. Some schools also were ordered to pay back scholarship money.

A Broward County school lost its scholarship eligibility when it failed to find a permanent home — and at one point, it held classes in a hotel conference room. At least a dozen schools, from Miramar to Jacksonville, got kicked out of the

programs, at least for a time, when they were caught forging parent signatures on scholarship checks or using other means to take scholarship money for children not enrolled at their schools.

“We hold participating private schools accountable to the full extent of the law,” Collins wrote to the Sentinel.

But the Sentinel found that in some cases enforcement is lax.



Hidden Treasure Preschool Christian Academy is located in Sanford. ((Leslie Postal / Orlando Sentinel))

The state allowed at least eight schools that submitted bogus fire or health reports, including Hidden Treasure Preschool Christian Academy in Sanford, to receive scholarship money after it discovered the documents were phony. In some cases, the school reassigned or terminated the person responsible, and the department found that sufficient, a DOE spokeswoman said.

Hidden Treasure, a small school in a 1970s house that received at least \$8,000 in scholarship money last year, submitted a form showing a clean inspection in 2013. But the actual inspection by the Sanford Fire Department documented problems with electrical wiring and emergency lighting.

The department allowed Hidden Treasure to take the scholarships after it fixed the code violations. Judy Scott, the school's director, did not answer questions about how the false form was sent to Tallahassee.

Jon Pasqualone, executive director of the Florida Fire Marshals and Inspectors Association, said schools turning in falsified documents is troubling.

"School is where children spend the majority of their day away from the protection of their parents and their home. It's absolutely imperative that schools are safe for our children," said Pasqualone, a retired fire marshal in Martin County.

Despite problems, school keeps getting scholarships

Agape Christian Academy in west Orange County forged fire safety inspections, hired staff with criminal records and failed to turn in required test scores on time, all violations of Florida scholarship rules, records show.

Despite nearly a decade of problems, the school housed in a cluster of aging buildings on Hiawassee Road enrolled about 115 scholarship students in the 2016-2017 school year and collected \$5.6 million in scholarships since 2012. The department revoked the school's scholarship eligibility on Aug. 3 after it found yet another rule violation. The school remains open, and the owner's attorney said they are challenging their 10-year suspension from the scholarship programs.

Bright Learning-Cyber High rented a building on Aloma Avenue near Winter Park for its school — until it was evicted in May. The building, which reporters visited while school was still in session, had holes in the office wall and ceiling and an empty room the director called its library.

Orange County court records show the school's owners had stopped paying rent in March 2016 and owed the landlord \$50,000. A judge ruled against the school but has not yet determined how much it must pay in back rent.

The education department said it wasn't aware of the eviction proceedings, but even if it had been, those financial troubles wouldn't have barred the school from

receiving state scholarships. Bright Learning enrolled 30 scholarship students last year and collected about \$170,000.

The school has moved to a shopping plaza not far from Colonial Drive in east Orange County. Seventeen scholarship students are enrolled, the education department said.



Bright Learning/Cyber High Private School, shown here at its original location, is located in East Orange County. ((Leslie Postal / Orlando Sentinel))

Joanne Friedland, who runs the school with her husband, called the eviction irrelevant to the school’s participation in the scholarship programs. “We had a conflict. It’s been resolved.”

Alan and Joanne Friedland previously helped operate failed charter schools — public schools run by private groups — in Orange and Seminole counties. Both charter schools were shut down in 2002 by local school boards that cited serious academic and financial problems.

The Friedlands, along with another relative, converted Cyber High to a private school and began taking state scholarships in 2003. At least two other private schools in Central Florida, and a few others across the state, are also former

charter schools that local boards either shut down or pressured to close because of poor performance.

Samuel Vidal, who ran a private Christian school in Brevard with his wife, shut down his campus last year after a student told police he had improperly touched her. Vidal and his wife then opened a new school under a different name and continued to take scholarship students.



Samuel Vidal, 41, a Palm Bay pastor and principal, was arrested and charged with lewd or lascivious molestation of a child in February of 2017. ((Brevard County Sheriff's Office))

The department said the first school was registered under Vidal's name and the second under his wife's, so it did not realize the connection.

Palm Bay police arrested Vidal in February and charged him with lewd or lascivious molestation. Vidal, through his attorney, denied the allegations. After the arrest, the education department revoked the second school's scholarships. But this summer, the department approved scholarships for yet another new school run by people with ties to Vidal, though his wife said she and her husband don't have a role on that campus.

At the now-closed Heaven Academy, a school for students with autism, a teacher wrote to the state in October of 2016, questioning whether one of the school's owners was misusing state scholarships and Medicaid money and whether the owner had state approval to hold classes on Heaven's Orlando campus — which was not authorized to receive scholarships. The owner also ran Angels Center for Autism, an Orange County school that was approved to take scholarships.

The education department requested some documents from Angels but did not ask if it had opened the Heaven campus and took no action against the school, where 99 scholarship students attended. Angels took in more than \$706,000 in scholarship money last school year.

Four months later, police arrested that owner and school office manager, accusing them of stealing more than \$4.5 million in Medicaid funds from student accounts. Only then did the department revoke the school's scholarships, citing the arrests and the use of an unauthorized school site, which the teacher tipped off the department about months earlier. The department, in a document written after the arrests, said it did not act earlier because it had nothing to “conclusively show” violations of state law.

The office manager has pleaded guilty and is awaiting sentencing. The arrested owner, Maria Navarro Martin, has pleaded not guilty and is awaiting trial.

Melendez, the Osceola mother of autistic twins, pulled them from Central Pointe Christian Academy after a week.



Edda Melendez and her three boys, left to right, twins Jahdiel and Jonathan, 5; and older brother Ryan Ramos, 9, at their Kissimmee home. ((Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda / Orlando Sentinel))

One of her sons ended up with a teacher whose main qualification was “a calling from God,” Melendez said, but the young woman had no idea how to help the boy who seldom spoke and sometimes had tantrums. Melendez was also worried missing door locks and exit signs meant the school wasn’t ready for students.

She complained to the state about the academy’s “learning center” in September 2016. The education department told her it could do nothing about academics and took no notice of her concerns about the new facility — which it didn’t know had opened — and a lack of city permits, records show.

Kissimmee officials confirmed Central Pointe opened that special-needs facility, in a former shopping center deli, last year without a required fire inspection or building permit. The city granted approval on Aug. 23 of this year, they said.

Yanira Pares, the school’s administrator, blamed the permit problem on the building’s landlord and insisted she did not put students in an unsafe facility. She did not notify the state of her new “learning center” because she didn’t realize she needed to, she said.

Central Pointe had more than 320 scholarship students last year, taking in more than \$3 million, and this year has more than 420 students relying on scholarships.



Central Pointe Christian Academy is located in Osceola County. ((Leslie Postal / Orlando Sentinel))

“It’s the only way a private school can stand strong,” Pares said. Central Pointe serves Osceola’s Hispanic population, whose parents value the school’s Christian lessons and bilingual staff, she said.

Most of her teachers have bachelor’s degrees, though she does employ a few teaching assistants who do not, including the young woman Melendez referred to, Pares said. Melendez said the young woman, whatever her title, acted as her son’s teacher.

Just as they are free from public school hiring rules, private schools that take state scholarships are exempt from giving the Florida Standards Assessments, the state’s standardized tests. But they must give some scholarship students another exam of their choosing, and Florida hires outside experts to study those results.

No consequences for poor academic performance

There are no consequences, however, for the students or schools when the studies show some schools leave children worse off academically. More than 70 schools, out of about 280 studied, showed declines in students' math or reading skills, according to the most recent report.

A separate study released last month by the Urban Institute found the tax-credit program increased the rate at which students go on to enroll at community college by about 15 percent, though the authors said those results were "tempered" because the scholarships did little to boost the likelihood students actually earned a degree.

The typical Florida scholarship student makes appropriate academic gains, but some attend excellent private schools while others go to ones that hurt students' academic progress, said David Figlio, dean of the school of education and social policy at Northwestern University, who conducted some of the studies while he was at the University of Florida.

Parents don't always have enough information to avoid the "terrible schools," Figlio said. "There needs to be a role for public monitoring."

GALLERY: See pictures from our Schools without Rules project. »

Tawanna Smith enrolled her two children at Harvest Baptist in Orlando last year because she didn't like the "gossiping and fighting" at her daughter's public middle school or state testing, which often tripped up her daughter.

"I love the scholarship program," she said. "You don't have to worry about all those tests."

Smith's only complaint was that Harvest Baptist has limited resources. Housed in an older building, the school has only a patch of grass and a gravel parking lot for recess or sports. Her daughter, now in ninth grade, is back in a public school and her son, a seventh grader who is still using a tax-credit scholarship, is at a larger private school that has better facilities, including a gym, she said.

Many of the private schools that take scholarships lack amenities common at public schools, including art and music rooms, athletic facilities, laptops and other technology and free meals for needy kids.

But they still offer children what they need, supporters say.



Harvest Baptist Christian Academy is located in Orlando. ((Leslie Postal / Orlando Sentinel))

“No matter how big or small the school is, or no matter how it looks, doesn’t determine the quality of what’s behind it,” said Krista Jex, director of Scholar’s Prep Academy, a private school that opened in a shopping center in Orange County last year and recently moved to a bigger facility. Parents, she said, want a place that will “just do right by the kids.”

Step Up for Students, the nonprofit agency that administers most of the tax credit and Gardiner scholarships, said demand for the scholarships is increasing every year because so many disadvantaged parents think their children are ill-served by public schools.

Step Up is a key player in Florida’s school-choice movement. The group’s founder, John Kirtley, helped create the program with then Gov. Jeb Bush and worked for years with DeVos advocating for voucher programs nationwide.

Step Up President Doug Tuthill acknowledged that one of the chief political selling points of tax-credit scholarships — that they cost less than the amount it

takes to educate a child in the public school system — is also one of the program’s flaws.



Arcelis Rodriguez picked Scholar's Prep for her six-year-old daughter Grace last year because her older daughter was bullied in her public school. ((Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda / Orlando Sentinel))

“The scholarship ought to be worth more ... ought to be able to pay teachers the way we pay teachers in district schools,” Tuthill said. “These schools don’t have nearly the resources that public schools have.”

This spring, the Legislature boosted the value of the tax-credit scholarship, from \$5,886 to as much as \$7,000. The state is spending an average of \$7,297 for each child in public school.

But some parents who used scholarships wished the state would hold private schools to a higher standard.

Highland, the Lake mother who complained to the state, used scholarships to enroll her children in private school because she thought a smaller setting would be better.

But she grew disappointed with the Little Red School House in Zellwood. Teachers worked with outdated books and few materials, and the school's owner "ran the school like a daycare," she wrote. The school, whose owner declined to comment, shut down at the beginning of last school year after nearly 20 years.

"I think someone should have come and said, 'You're not doing this.'" Highland said. "These kids are not getting what they should be getting."

But she also remains convinced that public school isn't a good fit for her kids. They are using a scholarship again this year, this time at a new private school.

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About Schools Without Rules

The Orlando Sentinel spent months reporting on Florida's scholarship programs, which will send nearly \$1 billion to private schools this year.

Sentinel reporters Beth Kassab, Annie Martin and Leslie Postal visited 35 private schools in Orange, Osceola, Lake, Seminole and Brevard counties. In most cases the visits were unannounced, and the reporters identified themselves and asked to tour the school and talk with staff.

The Sentinel also reviewed thousands of pages of Florida Department of Education documents, court records and other materials in addition to interviewing dozens of people, including parents, students, school operators and policy experts.

The reporters and multimedia specialist Adelaide Chen used a state database of student enrollment and scholarship dollars for the 2016-17 school year to analyze how and where the money is spent and create an interactive search function for readers to look up their own towns and schools throughout the state.

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