



SPREADING THE NEWS

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Report says scholarship attracts state's lowest-performing, poorest students, and they are keeping academic pace

TAMPA — The first academic report card on students receiving Florida Tax Credit Scholarships has concluded that the program is attracting some of the state's lowest-performing and poorest children from public schools, and that they are keeping pace with both a state public school comparison group and all students nationally.

The report, released today by the state Department of Education, was calibrated in its conclusions but did say that scholarship participants "tend to be among the lowest-performing students in their prior school, regardless of the performance level of their public school" and that "test score gains for program participants are similar in magnitude to comparable students in the public schools."

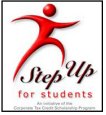
Doug Tuthill, president of Step Up For Students, the nonprofit organization that oversees the program, said he was pleased. "It's gratifying to see how well these students stack up against a comparison group that apparently has higher incomes," Tuthill said, "We'll need more years of data to draw more definitive conclusions, but this is an impressive start for a program that serves our state's neediest children while receiving only 57 cents on the public education dollar." Scholarships are limited by law to a maximum of \$3,950 per year, roughly 57 percent of current public school per-pupil spending.

The report is the result of a 2006 law that requires every scholarship student to take a nationally norm-referenced test. DOE contracted with respected University of Florida and Northwestern University researcher David Figlio, who analyzed nationally norm-referenced test scores from 2007-08 and placed them in the context of previous testing data and comparison groups. Figlio wrote that his findings were hampered by incomplete baseline year data and a public school comparison group that likely included students from higher-income brackets. As such, he cautioned against attributing any "causal effects" to many of his findings.

"The first evidence regarding differential test score gains across the public and CTC Scholarship Program sectors," the report concludes, "indicates roughly comparable test score gains that are reasonably consistent across different performance groups and unlikely due to family income differences between participants and non-participants."

The comparison to comparable public school students was not easy, because Figlio discovered that free and reduced lunch income requirements are verified for every scholarship student but for only 3 percent of the public school students. Also, he wrote, the public school audit results "strongly suggest" the income differences "may be substantial." The actual learning gains for scholarship stu-

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dents were .042 percentile ranking points lower in math and 1.62 percentile points lower in reading. The report described the math score as “statistically indistinguishable from zero” and the reading score as “very modest in magnitude” and added: “These differences do not represent causal effect of program participation, and may reflect differences in student demographics or other attributes.”

The national test comparison was easier to make. The typical Tax Credit Scholarship student scored at the 45th percentile in reading and 46th percentile in math on the Stanford Achievement Test in spring 2008, a ranking that includes all test-takers nationwide. The mean reading gain was -0.1 percentile ranking point and the mean math gain was -0.9 . “In other words,” the report stated, “the typical student participating in the program tended to maintain his or her relative position in comparison with others nationwide. It is important to note that these national comparisons pertain to all students nationally, and not just low-income students.”

The scholarship program served 23,400 students in nearly 1,000 private schools this past school year, and is limited to students from families that qualify for the federal free or reduced lunch program. Two-thirds of the students are black or Hispanic, three-fifths live in single-parent homes, and the average income for a household of four is about \$25,400. Figlio was able to go one step further. He looked at public school test scores of students prior to entering the program, and his report may help dispel political concerns about whether the program skims higher-achieving students.

“Scholarship participants have significantly poorer test performance in the year prior to starting the scholarship program than do non-participants,” Figlio wrote. “... These differences are large in magnitude and are statistically significant, and indicate that scholarship participants tend to be considerably more disadvantaged and lower-performing than their non-participating counterparts.”

Tuthill said the finding is consistent with what he sees on a daily basis. “It is not easy to meet our income verification process, and our scholarship is so low that most of our families really struggle to pay the full tuition,” Tuthill said. “So the students we serve tend to be seriously off track with their education and have parents who are desperate for another option. That’s one reason we see this option as so vital to public education.”

What are the primary national tests the Tax Credit students take?

The tests are from a list approved by the Department of Education. In 2007-08, according to the report, the main three tests were: 71 percent took the Stanford Achievement Test, 20 percent took the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, and 4 percent took the Terra Nova Achievement Test.

Why don’t the Tax Credit students take the FCAT?

State law forbids private schools from administering the FCAT and requires that scholarships students take a DOE-approved nationally norm-referenced standardized test. Scholarship students wanting to take the FCAT in addition to the national test have to schedule and take the FCAT at a local public school.

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