



FLORIDA CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

The nonpartisan public policy voice of the Catholic Church in Florida

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POSITION PAPER

Parental Empowerment in Education Benefits all Schoolchildren

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Florida continues to be a leading state for policies which support parental empowerment in education. This concept is closely aligned with longstanding Church teaching that parents are the primary educators of their children.^{1, 2} As such, they are best positioned to determine which academic settings or options will best meet the unique needs of their school-aged children.

Today, parents truly have more options than ever before to consider and evaluate. These options include but are not limited to the following: public (including neighborhood, charter and magnet) or nonpublic school; traditional brick-and-mortar school, home or virtual school; and blended learning programs (i.e. schools which combine virtual learning with traditional classroom instruction).

As an essential part of the parental choice landscape, the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops (FCCB) strongly supports existing state scholarship programs. All told, Catholic schools currently serve more than 26,000 students who receive scholarships under any one of the state's four major school choice programs. The Catholic school community in each of the seven dioceses is participating in these programs, which include:

- the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program for low to middle income families;
- the McKay Scholarship Program for students with special needs;
- the Gardiner Scholarship Program for students with special needs; and,
- the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program for four-year olds.

Catholic and other nonpublic school parents often make difficult sacrifices to pay tuition and fees while also supporting public schools through their hard-earned tax dollars. The system of Catholic schools provides significant savings to the state of Florida. There are currently 77,403 K-12 children served in Florida's 241 Catholic schools. The cost to educate these children in public schools would have been \$564 million during the 2017-2018 school year.³ Even after subtracting out the value of FTC, McKay and Gardiner scholarships provided to Catholic school students (\$127 million in 2017-2018), these schools save the state more than \$431 million per year.

Many parents have exercised their choice to enroll their children in an education setting that they determine to best meet their academic and other family needs. The FCCB advocates for true parental empowerment in education and supports legislation that expands state scholarship programs as well as a strong system of public education. The FCCB will continue to urge the state to develop policies which address the best interests of all schoolchildren.

¹ See 1965 Declaration on Christian Education "Gravissimum Educationis" as [linked](#) and excerpted here: "Since parents have given children their life, they are bound by the most serious obligation to educate their offspring and therefore must be recognized as the primary and principal educators."

² Also see the 2016 Apostolic Exhortation "Amoris Laetitia" by Pope Francis as [linked](#) and excerpted here: "At the same time I feel it is important to reiterate that the overall education of children is a "most serious duty" and at the same time a "primary right" of parents. This is not just a task or a burden, but an essential and inalienable right that parents are called to defend and of which no one may claim to deprive them. The State offers educational programs in a subsidiary way, supporting the parents in their indeclinable role... ."

³ Presumes FEFP of \$7,296 per child multiplied by 77,403 K-12 children in Florida's Catholic schools.