



SPREADING THE NEWS

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Tax Credit Scholarship students making solid academic gains, outpacing low-income students in public schools

A new state report concludes that students on the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship are making modestly larger gains in reading and math than other low-income students in public schools, even though the scholarship students were among the lowest performers in the public schools they left behind. (See report at http://www.floridaschoolchoice.org/pdf/FTC_Research_2009-10_report.pdf)

"These differences, while not large in magnitude, are larger and more statistically significant than in the past year's results, suggesting that successive cohorts of participating students may be gaining ground over time," the report stated.

The report, based on nationally norm-referenced test results from the 2009-10 school year, is the fourth annual academic assessment of the low-income students who receive the scholarship. It also concluded, as it has in previous years, that the low-income students achieved the same annual gains in reading and math as students of all income levels nationally.

The report was greeted with support by Florida Education Commissioner Gerard Robinson.

"I am encouraged by the findings in the latest Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program report," said Commissioner Robinson. "The upward trend demonstrated in the report illustrates that scholarship students are keeping pace with, and sometimes exceeding, their public school peers in both reading and mathematics. I look forward to continuing to offer support to a program that provides our lower income families with learning options they historically could not access."

Doug Tuthill, president of Step Up For Students, the nonprofit scholarship organization that helps administer the scholarships, agreed. "We are always careful not to read too much into a single year's worth of test data, but this trend is certainly encouraging," said Tuthill. "We have known the scholarship is attracting students who were having serious academic problems, and these findings suggest they are indeed getting back on track. That's good news for all of us in public education."

The Tax Credit Scholarship, which is limited to students whose household income qualifies them for free or reduced-price lunch, served 34,550 students in 1,114 different private schools last year. Two-thirds were black or Hispanic, three-fifths lived with a single parent, and the average household income was only 21 percent above poverty. The program is financed by companies whose contributions receive a dollar-for-dollar state tax credit, and the scholarship this fall is \$4,011, which is less than half the total per-student cost in public schools.

The report released today by the Department of Education is the result of a 2006 law that requires every scholarship student to take a nationally norm-referenced test. DOE contracts with the University of Florida and respected Northwestern University researcher David Figlio to analyze the results, and Figlio issued three basic academic findings:

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■ The program continues to attract students who are having significant academic problems in public schools, a trend that “is becoming stronger over time.” He writes: “Scholarship participants have significantly poorer test performance in the year prior to starting the scholarship program than do non-participants. ... These differences are large in magnitude and are statistically significant, and indicate that scholarship participants tend to be considerably more disadvantaged and lower-performing upon entering the program than their non-participating counterparts.”

■ The students kept pace against national competition. Their ranking was at the 45th percentile in reading and 46th percentile in math. Their mean gain in reading was -1.2 percentile points and in math was -1.7 percentile points. He explains the numbers this way: “In other words, 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 students had modestly better gains in reading and math than similar low-income students in public schools: “The estimated effects of program participation on math performance are statistically significantly positive at conventional levels ... and the estimated effects on reading performance are significantly positive in the case of reading.” Figlio wrote that these higher gains were made more impressive by the fact that scores for low-income students in public schools were also increasing. He concluded: “These results, coupled with those from the previous year, indicate that participation in the FTC Scholarship Program may benefit participating students relative to their default public schools.”

Q&A

What national tests do the Tax Credit students take?

The tests are from a list approved by the Department of Education. The report identified the main three tests in 2009-10 as: the Stanford Achievement Test (69.2 percent of test takers); Iowa Test of Basic Skill (20.6 percent); and Terra Nova Achievement Test (3.7 percent).

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

One reason is that state law forbids private schools from administering the FCAT. That means that scholarship students wanting to take the FCAT have to schedule it at a local public school in addition to the national test they take at their scholarship school.

Why is it so hard to compare Tax Credit students to public school students on free or reduced lunch?

Dr. Figlio says their incomes are not equal. The average household income for scholarship students in 2009-10 was 18 percent above poverty, but the cutoff for free or reduced lunch is 85 percent above poverty and the failure rate of public school lunch audits suggest it may be much higher. He also writes: “Scholarship participants are more likely than non-participants to be black, and less likely to be Hispanic or white, and participants are less likely than are non-participants to speak English as a second language.”

Why can't we see how individual schools are performing on these tests?

That's coming next year. Under a law passed by the Legislature in 2010, learning gains for each individual school with at least 30 test gain scores will be reported along with the statewide information. It begins with the 2010-11 test scores, which are scheduled to be released in the summer of 2012.

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