
SURVEYING FLORIDA SCHOLARSHIP FAMILIES

Experiences and Satisfaction with Florida's
Tax-Credit Scholarship Program

Jason Bedrick
Lindsey Burke



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EdChoice is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to advancing full and unencumbered educational choice as the best pathway to successful lives and a stronger society. EdChoice believes that families, not bureaucrats, are best equipped to make K–12 schooling decisions for their children. The organization works at the state level to educate diverse audiences, train advocates and engage policymakers on the benefits of high-quality school choice programs. EdChoice is the intellectual legacy of Milton and Rose D. Friedman, who founded the organization in 1996 as the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2001, Florida became the third state to establish a tax-credit scholarship (TCS) program to help eligible families enroll their child in the school of their choice. Under the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program, corporations receive dollar-for-dollar tax credits against their state income tax in return for contributions to non-profit scholarship-funding organizations (SFOs) that provide private school scholarships to eligible children, the vast majority of whom are from low-income families. Florida's TCS program now serves more than 108,000 students, making it the largest private school choice program in the country.

Florida's tax-credit scholarship program serves some of the state's most disadvantaged students. Recipients are primarily non-white students from low-income families—often with household incomes well below the poverty line. During the 2017–18 academic year, the average household income of participating families was \$25,362, or 8.2 percent above the federal poverty level after adjusting for varying family sizes.¹ More than half of the scholarship students (55%) live with one parent. Moreover, state-mandated annual reports have consistently found that the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program attracts students who score lower on standardized exams than other demographically similar students before entering the program.

This survey explores the preferences and experiences of parents and guardians of Florida children using a tax-credit scholarship. As the largest ever conducted of participants in a private school choice program, it represents some of the strongest evidence to date of the views and educational priorities of parents exercising school choice. Working with Hanover Research and Step Up for Students, the SFO that provides nearly all the tax-credit scholarships in Florida, we distributed the survey to 66,469 unique email addresses of Florida parents, and we report results from more than 14,000 parents participating in Florida's tax-credit scholarship program.

The survey finds:

- The vast majority of scholarship parents (92%) expressed satisfaction with the tax-credit scholarship program, including 89 percent who were “completely satisfied.” Only 7 percent expressed being somewhat or completely dissatisfied.
- Scholarship families were also very satisfied with their chosen schools. Nearly nine out of 10 parents (89%) expressed satisfaction with the school their child currently attends using a Step Up for Students scholarship, including 72 percent who were completely satisfied. Only 9 percent expressed dissatisfaction.
- The tax-credit scholarship program appears to be increasing educational opportunities available to families in Florida. When asked what type of school their child would attend if they were not using a tax-credit scholarship, most parents (71%) said that their child would be enrolled in some type of public school.
- More than 90 percent of scholarship families reported that it was very easy (73%) or easy (16%) to find a school where they wanted to enroll their child using a tax-credit scholarship.
- Slightly more than half of scholarship parents (52%) reported that their child had previously been enrolled in another school prior to the one they currently attend. Of those children, nearly three out of five were previously enrolled in some sort of public school, including traditional district schools (47%), public charter schools (8%), public magnet schools (4%), or the Florida Virtual School (1%).
- Families rely heavily on their family and community when exploring educational options. Seventy-six percent of parents reported they initially heard about the school their child currently attends through their own social network, including a friend or relative (50%), their house of worship (14%), and other scholarship families (12%).

¹Step Up for Students, Basic Program Facts about the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship (FTC) [web page], retrieved from <https://www.stepupforstudents.org/newsroom/basic-program-facts>

- Parents place a high value on their child's character development. When asked to list the top three factors that influenced their decision to have their child attend their chosen school, the only factors to be selected by a majority of scholarship parents were religious environment/instruction (66%) and morals/character/values instruction (52%). These two highly influential factors were followed by a safe environment (36%), academic reputation (34%), and small classes (31%). The least important factor was standardized test scores, which only 4 percent of parents listed as one of their top three factors.
- Switching school types with a scholarship appears to have a positive effect on parental efforts to support their child's education. Among respondents whose child was previously enrolled in a public district or charter school before using a scholarship to enroll in a private school, most parents reported engaging in a variety of education-related activities more often than before switching schools, including: communicating with teachers (77%), participating in school activities (72%), volunteering or doing community service (63%), reading to their child (57%), using an online educational resource like Khan Academy (56%), and working on math homework with their child (52%).
- The vast majority of scholarship parents (80%) reported that a family member drives their child to school most days. A majority of parents (57%) reported that their child spends 15 minutes or less commuting to school one way while fewer than 1 in 10 reported that it takes more than 30 minutes.

In addition to key findings gleaned from the survey pertaining to the preferences and experiences of parents, this report considers implications for policymakers working in states to advance educational choice options for families. The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program is clearly expanding access to a quality education for some of Florida's most disadvantaged students. Parents are highly satisfied with the education their child receives using the scholarships, and they tend to select schools for important reasons that metrics-focused policymakers often do not emphasize, such as character formation. Expanding the scholarship program would help even more families enroll their children in schools that meet their individual needs and reflect their values. Florida policymakers could also do more to ensure that transportation does not become an obstacle to education, including reallowing tax-credit scholarship funds to be used for transportation to private schools, similar to the program's policy on transportation to out-of-district public schools.ⁱⁱ

ⁱⁱPreviously, the program allowed up to 25 percent of the scholarship value to be used for transportation to an eligible private school. A statutory change in 2008 removed this provision. Scholarships may still be used to attend public schools outside the district in which a student resides, as well as to public lab schools. Florida Administrative Code & Florida Administrative Register, Florida Chapter 2008-241, Council Substitute for House Bill No. 653, Section (6)(d)1, p. 3, retrieved from <http://laws.flrules.org/2008/241>

INTRODUCTION

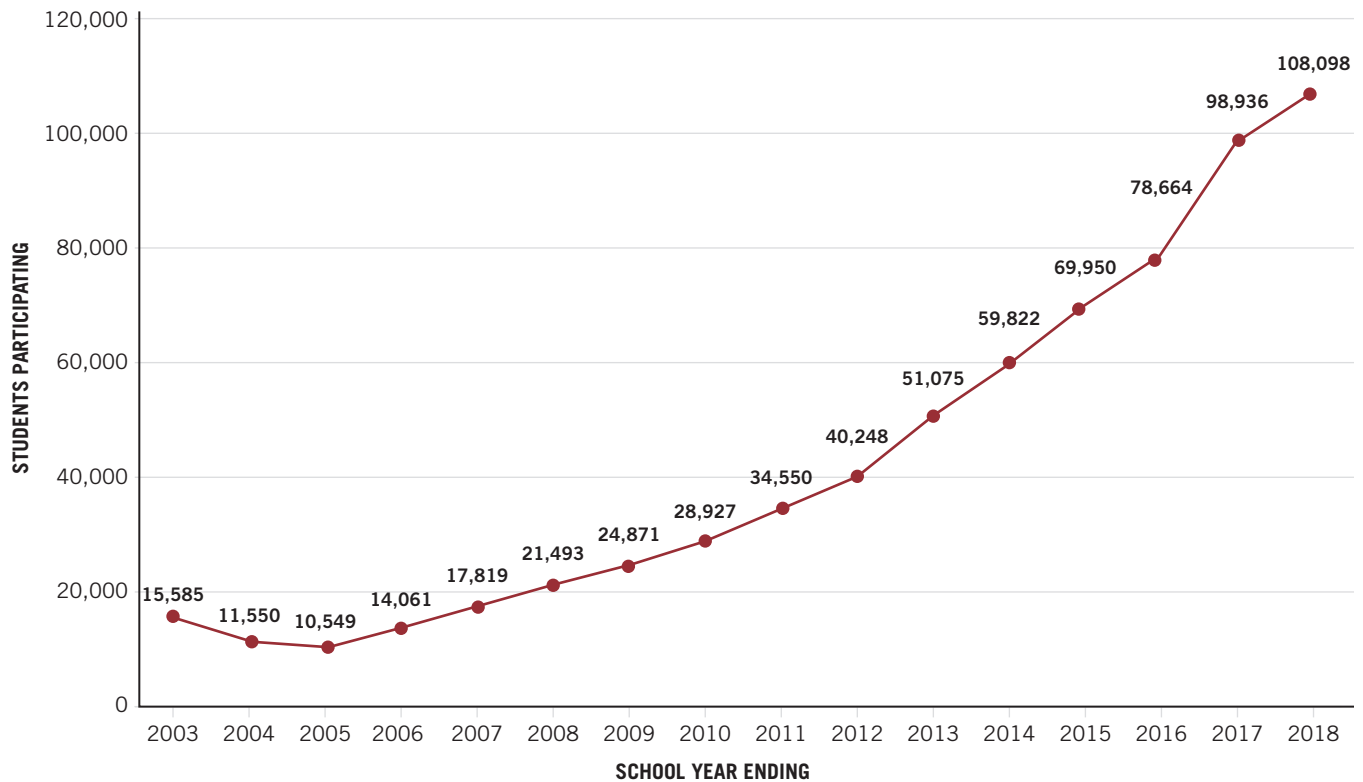
Tax-credit scholarship (TCS) programs serve more students nationally than any other form of publicly funded private school choice program. As more states consider enacting private school choice policies, the issue is garnering increased attention and has become the subject of heated debates. All too frequently, debates over school choice policies focus on test scores. This emphasis is understandable—test scores are a relatively objective measure that are viewed as a proxy for school effectiveness. But families know that their children are more than scores, and they expect schools to provide value far beyond merely boosting test scores. Unfortunately, the voices of parents are often absent or ignored in debates about school choice policies. This report seeks to bring the crucial voices of parents to the fore by presenting results from the largest survey ever conducted among parents of children participating in a private school choice program.

Background

Florida has long been a pioneer for private school choice policies. In 2001, Florida became the third state after Arizona and Pennsylvania to enact a tax-credit scholarship program, which offers dollar-for-dollar tax credits to corporations in return for contributions to nonprofit scholarship-funding organizations (SFOs), such as Step Up for Students. The SFOs then grant scholarships to children from low-income families to use at the eligible private school of their choice, including both religious and secular options. In the first five years of the program, between 10,000 and 15,000 students participated annually.¹ However, a provision that annually raises the cap on available tax credits allowed the program to grow along with increased demand. During the 2017–18 academic year, 108,098 Florida students received tax-credit scholarships to attend more than 1,800 private schools, making it the largest private school choice program in the nation.²

FIGURE 1

Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program Participation
The Program surpassed 100,000 student participants for the first time in 2017–18.



Source: EdChoice, School Choice in America Dashboard [web page], accessed October 15, 2018, retrieved from <https://www.edchoice.org/school-choice/school-choice-in-america>

Florida's tax-credit scholarship program serves some of the state's most disadvantaged students. Recipients are primarily non-white students from low-income families—often with household incomes well below the poverty line. Moreover, state-mandated annual reports have consistently found that the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program attracts students who score lower on standardized exams before entering the program than other demographically similar students. In 2016–17, for example, researchers from Florida State University found that, “compared to eligible non-participant students, new [tax-credit scholarship] students had poorer test performance both in English Language Arts (ELA) and math before entering the [scholarship] program and they tended to come from lower-performing public schools.”³ Nevertheless, despite their numerous disadvantages, the report found that scholarship students performed at about the national average on standardized tests, outscoring their demographic peers.

Research has also shown that the tax-credit scholarships program has had a positive effect on student enrollment in college. A 2017 study by the Urban Institute found that participation in the scholarship program “increased college enrollment rates by 6 percentage points, or about 15 percent, for students who participated in the [scholarship] program at some point during their education.”⁴ The benefit of the scholarships increased the longer a student participated in the program. Students who had used scholarships for four or more years were as much as 17 percentage points (46%) more likely to enroll in college than non-participating students. However, although it is too early to determine the impact of the program on eventually attaining a bachelor's degree, the study found only a small increase (about half of a percentage point) in associate degree attainment.

Research has found that non-participating students benefit as well. A 2010 study by researchers at Northwestern University found that “the increased competitive pressure public schools faced following the introduction of the Florida Tax Credit

Scholarship Program led to general improvements in [the public schools'] performance.”⁵ Although scholarship program's positive effects on public schools were generally modest, they were “much more pronounced in the schools [that were] most at risk to lose students” to the scholarship program.⁶

In addition to benefitting both participating and non-participating students, research has found that the tax-credit scholarships also benefit taxpayers. Taxpayers save money when families opt to use the scholarships for private schools because the reduction in government revenues from the tax credits ends up being less than what the state spends per pupil on students who attend local public schools. According to the state legislature's nonpartisan Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA), for every dollar that the tax credits reduce state revenue, Florida taxpayers save \$1.44 in reduced state expenditures.⁷ Likewise, an EdChoice study, *The Tax-Credit Scholarship Audit*, calculated that after accounting for students who would have attended a private school even without the tax-credit scholarship program, Florida taxpayers save between \$1,122 and \$1,658 per scholarship student.⁸ The cumulative savings from 2002–03 through 2013–14 is estimated to be between \$372 million and \$550 million.⁹

As with every other tax-credit scholarship law, the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship has withstood constitutional challenges. In 2014, more than a decade after the law's enactment, the Florida Education Association and its allies challenged the scholarship law, arguing that it violated two provisions of the state constitution: 1) the “uniformity clause,” which mandates that “adequate provision shall be made by law for a uniform, efficient, safe, secure, and high quality system of free public schools,”¹⁰ and 2) the state's historically anti-Catholic Blaine Amendment, which states that “no revenue of the state . . . shall ever be taken from the public treasury directly or indirectly in aid of any church, sect, or religious denomination or in aid of any sectarian institution.”¹¹ In 2015, a trial court found that the petitioners lacked standing to sue, as they could not

demonstrate any harm, so the program continued as they appealed the decision.¹²

In 2016, an appellate court concurred with the trial court, unanimously ruling that the petitioners lacked standing.¹³ The court could have left it at that, but its reasoning essentially addressed the merits of the case as well. Although an earlier Florida Supreme Court decision had struck down a voucher program under the state's uniformity clause, the appellate court rejected both of the plaintiff's claims against the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program because "tax credits received by taxpayers who have contributed to SFOs are not the equivalent of revenues remitted to the state treasury." The tax-credit scholarships are constitutional because the state is neither funding a separate and non-uniform system of schools, nor appropriating public funds to religious schools. In 2017, the Florida Supreme Court declined to hear an appeal, effectively securing the program against further legal challenge.

The legal threat to the program from special interest groups revealed its popularity with the broader public. As the courts were considering the challenge, more than 10,000 Floridians joined the Save Our Scholarships Coalition at the "Rally in Tally" in January of 2016 to express support for the scholarship law.¹⁴ "This is about justice," declared the Rev. Martin Luther King III, who headlined the rally, "This is about righteousness. This is about truth. This is about freedom—the freedom to choose what is best for your family and your child most importantly."¹⁵

This census of Step Up for Students scholarship families explores how and why families exercise their freedom to choose their child's school using the tax-credit scholarship program.

Why This Survey Matters

Hundreds of thousands of Florida families are choosing schools other than their assigned public district schools. They are choosing private schools, public charter schools, public magnet schools, virtual

schools, and even home school. To learn more about how and why Sunshine State parents choose private schools, this report describes the results of a large survey of parents who are using (or used or applied for) scholarships via the state's tax-credit scholarship program.

For a recent review of the research literature on surveys of parents participating in school choice programs, readers should consult the 2017 EdChoice report, *Why Indiana Parents Choose* and the 2017 Journal of School Choice article, "A Review of the Research on Parent Satisfaction in Private School Choice Programs."¹⁶ As the authors of the EdChoice report note, "As long as there is a debate surrounding school choice at the state and, especially, national level, many educational policymakers and stakeholders will need reliable data and information."¹⁷ Although the debates over school choice too often focus on the effects on test scores, policymakers should give considerable weight to the preferences of parents.

This report addresses the following research questions:

1. Which factors motivate parents to leave one school for another school?
2. How important are academic quality, religious and moral instruction, safety, and transportation to parents' school choice decisions?
3. How difficult is it for parents to find schools that meet their preferences?
4. How satisfied are parents with their current and former schools?
5. How satisfied are parents with the tax-credit scholarship program?
6. What difficulties, if any, did parents encounter during the scholarship application process?
7. What educational goals are most important to parents?
8. How have parents changed the ways in which they support their child's education since accepting a scholarship?

FLORIDA'S TAX-CREDIT SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

Mechanics of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program

Source of Revenue

Corporate donors to scholarship-funding organizations receive dollar-for-dollar tax credits against their corporate income taxes or insurance premium taxes. The total amount of credits was capped at \$698.9 million during the 2017–18 fiscal year. The total credit cap increases by 25 percent in the subsequent year whenever donors claim at least 90 percent of the available tax credits in a given year.¹⁸ This threshold has been reached every year since the 2012–13 fiscal year.

Eligibility

To be eligible to receive a scholarship, students must belong to households earning up to 260 percent of the federal poverty level (\$63,960 for a family of four in 2017–18). Students from households earning up to 200 percent of the poverty level (\$49,200 for a family of four) were eligible for full scholarships worth \$6,394 to \$7,004 in 2017–18, depending on their grade level. Students from households with an income between 200 percent and 260 percent of the federal poverty level can receive partial scholarships worth between 12 percent to 50 percent less than the scholarships for lower-income students. First priority is given to renewal students, followed by new students who are either in foster care or out-of-home care, or who are eligible for the federal free and reduced-price lunch program (students from families earning up to 185 percent of the federal poverty level, or \$45,510 for a family of four in 2017–18). Students placed in foster care or out-of-home care, as well as dependents of active-duty military personnel, may apply for a scholarship at any time

throughout the year. Renewal students and siblings of current scholarship recipients who live in the same household are also eligible so long as the household's current income level does not exceed 260 percent of the federal poverty level. Students who receive a scholarship after being placed in foster care or out-of-home care remain eligible regardless of their household income.¹⁹

Scholarship Values

Florida's tax-credit scholarships can be worth up to 96 percent of the state's unweighted Fulltime Equivalency (FTE) per-pupil funding although scholarships cannot exceed a private school's tuition and fees. During the 2017–18 academic year, the scholarship cap was \$6,394 for students in grades K–5, \$6,712 for students in grades 6–8 and \$7,004 for high school students.²⁰ In that year, the average scholarship was about \$6,011. During the 2018–19 academic year, the scholarship caps are slightly higher: \$6,519 for students in grades K–5, \$6,815 for students in grades 6–8 and \$7,111 for high school students.²¹

Private School Participation

In order to be eligible to enroll tax-credit scholarship students, private schools must meet several criteria, including being approved by the state, complying with all local and state health and safety codes and submitting to the state annual sworn compliance reports, complying with relevant federal nondiscrimination requirements, and subjecting their faculty and staff to federal background checks. The law also requires that teachers at participating schools have a bachelor's degree, three years of teaching experience, or special expertise. Schools in operation for less than three years must obtain a surety bond or letter of credit to cover the value of the scholarship payments for one quarter. Any school receiving more than \$250,000 in scholarship money must provide independent financial reporting to the

state. Scholarship students must take a nationally recognized norm-referenced test or the state public school assessment. All schools with at least 30 students in grades 3–10 in two or more consecutive years must have standardized test score gains analyzed by state researchers.²²

METHODOLOGY

Our online survey solicited responses from Florida parents with at least one child currently enrolled in kindergarten through 12th grade during the 2016–17 academic year. To participate in the census of Step Up for Students scholarship families, however, these parents had to have applied for a scholarship from Step Up Students for at least one of their children within the past two years. Although most applicants received scholarships and enrolled their child in a private school, some were not offered scholarships or were offered a scholarship and declined to accept it. As a result, the respondent

parents could have had a child enrolled in a public district school, homeschool, private school, Florida virtual school, public charter school, or public magnet school.

On June 17, 2017, a partner organization, Hanover Research, distributed the survey to 66,469 unique email addresses of parents who had applied for a scholarship from Step Up for Students. These email addresses were provided by Step Up for Students. Following the initial email on June 17, each panelist received up to six reminder emails (on July 19, 22, 27, and 31, and Aug. 3 and 5). The survey closed on Aug. 17, having received 19,034 responses, for a total response rate of 29 percent, not including dropped responses.

Before analyzing the results of the survey, 4,282 respondents were dropped for various reasons. First, duplicate responses were removed. Respondents were also dropped for not completing the majority of the survey, speeding through the survey (completing it in less than half the median

TABLE 1 Summary of Dropped Respondents

Reason	Sample Size
Disqualified responses	847
Blank or nearly blank responses	1,161
Partial responses	1,623
Duplicates	6
Flatliners and speeders	5
Inconsistent responses	40
Low-quality response	2
Did not answer key question (“Did you apply for a scholarship from Step Up for Students for at least one of your children in the past two years?”)	598
Total	4,282
Percent of Total Responses	22%

time), flatlining (i.e., selecting the same response across multiple matrix-style Likert-grid questions), and providing inconsistent responses or stating that they did not apply for a scholarship in the last two years. A total of 4,282 responses from the initial 19,034 responses were dropped from the analysis (see Table 2). After excluding those responses, the survey had 14,752 usable responses for a response rate of 22.2 percent.

All 14,752 remaining respondents reported that they had applied for a scholarship for at least one of their children in the previous two years. Of those, 606 applicants (4% of all applicants) were not offered a scholarship, usually because they did not meet the program eligibility requirements. Of the remaining 14,146 applicants who were offered a scholarship; 13,733 accepted and used the scholarship. 27 declined a scholarship; and 386 accepted a scholarship but withdrew from the program. For parents of scholarship students enrolled in private schools, who are the primary focus of this survey, the margin of error was +/- 0.8 percent, calculated at the 95 percent confidence level and assuming each parent responded to the survey for one child, as directed.

We understand that there are limitations to the methods for the survey analyzed in this report because no statistical adjustments were made with respect to demographics, and we did not employ randomized or probability-based sampling. That said, the survey has a robust sample of our target population: parents of students using tax-credit scholarships (see Appendix 1 for a detailed methodology).

SURVEY RESULTS

Demographics

Scholarship students in Florida tend to come from families that are less advantaged, less affluent, and less likely to be white than the general population. According to Step Up for Students, which provides scholarships to more than 99 percent of students participating in Florida’s tax-credit scholarship program,²³ the average household income of participating families was \$25,362 during the 2017–18 academic year or only 8.2 percent above the federal poverty level after accounting for varying family sizes.²⁴ According to the latest Census Bureau data, Florida’s median household income is \$48,900.²⁵ More than half of the scholarship students (55%) live with one parent.

Approximately 30 percent of scholarship students are black; 38 percent are Hispanic; 26 percent are white; and 3 percent identify as multi-racial.²⁶ According to the Florida Department of Education, 22 percent of district school students statewide are black; 33 percent are Hispanic; 38 percent are white; and 4 percent identify as multi-racial.²⁷ As detailed below, the survey respondents were more likely than the general scholarship population to report being black, white, or multi-racial and less likely to report being Hispanic than the general scholarship family population.

What follows is a description of the demographics of survey respondents. Because 97 percent of respondents were either the mother (85%) or father (12%) of the scholarship student, this paper

TABLE 2 Sample Size and Margin of Error by School Type

Student Type	K–12 Population Size (2016–17)	Sample Size	Percent of Population	Margin of Error
Scholarship Students	98,936	13,733	13.9%	+/- 0.8%

frequently uses the term “parents” to describe the survey respondents. This term is intended to include the 3 percent of respondents who were the legal guardian or other primary caretaker of the scholarship student.

Race and Ethnicity

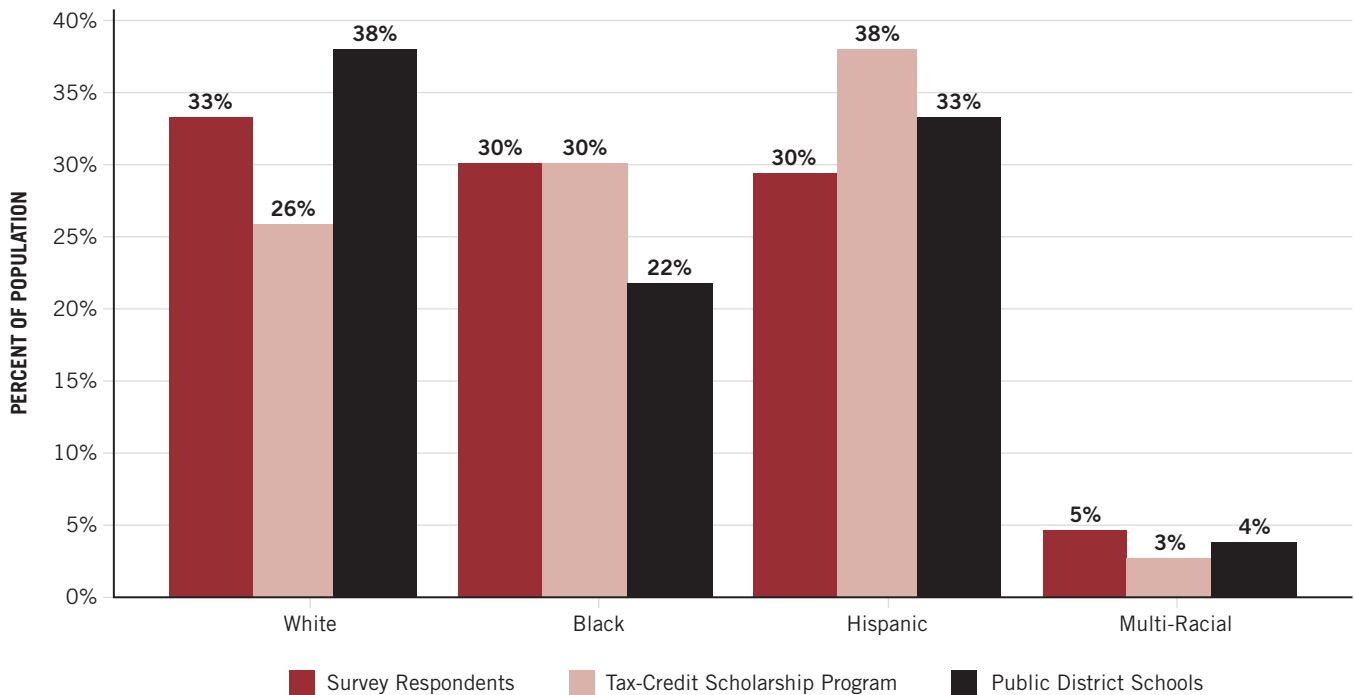
Two-thirds of respondents reported being non-white, excluding those who preferred not to report their race or ethnicity. Of those who listed their race or ethnicity, 33 percent reported being white; 30 percent reported being black; 30 percent reported being Hispanic; 2 percent reported being Asian; and 5 percent reported being two or more races. Less than 1 percent reported being Native American, Native Alaskan, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander.

Parental Education, Employment and Income

Most of the survey respondents (54%) reported that they did not have a college degree. About a third reported that their highest level of formal education included “some college or postsecondary technical training;” 18 percent had a high school diploma or GED; and 4 percent reported having completed only “some high school.” About one in four reported having a two- or four-year college degree or higher.

Slightly more than half (51%) of the parents reported working full-time, in addition to 8 percent who are self-employed and 13 percent who are employed part-time. Eleven percent reported being a stay-at-home parent or caregiver. Seven percent were unemployed. Only a small number reported being unable to work (3%), a student (2%), or retired

FIGURE 2 Race/Ethnicity of Survey Respondents, TSC Students and District Students



Sources: EdChoice, 2017 Survey of Florida Tax-Credit Scholarship Families (conducted July 5–August 17, 2017); United States Census Bureau, Quick Facts: Florida [web page], last modified July 2017, retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/FL>; Step Up for Students, Basic Program Facts about the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship (FTC) [web page], retrieved from <https://www.stepupforstudents.org/newsroom/basic-program-facts>

(1%). Among those who were employed, the most popular fields were healthcare/medical (21%) and education (15%). Among those working in the field of education, 22 percent worked in a district school (340 parents).

Survey respondents have significantly lower incomes than Florida's median household income of \$48,900. Excluding the 8 percent who preferred not to respond, the vast majority (86%) reported annual household incomes of less than \$45,600. A plurality (38%) of those reporting their income earned less than \$24,600 annually. Only 14 percent reported earning \$45,600 or more annually.

Household Size

A majority (72%) of the respondents' households have between three and five people: 14 percent reported a household size of two people; 25 percent reported three people; 29 percent reported four people; 19 percent reported five people; and 14 percent reported six or more people.

Schooling Choices

Families with multiple children may enroll them in different types of schools. Because our sample included only the parents or guardians of current scholarship students or students who had withdrawn from the scholarship program or applied but did not receive a scholarship, it makes sense that 98 percent of respondents had at least one child enrolled in a private school. However, many families also enrolled at least one of their children in other learning environments, including 6 percent in a public district school, 2 percent in the Florida Virtual School (or other online program), 2 percent in a public charter school, 1 percent in a public magnet school, and 1 percent homeschooled.

Interestingly, relatively higher-income families were more likely than lower-income families to enroll their children in a public district school.

Among families with an annual household income of less than \$24,600, only 5 percent enrolled at least one child in a public district school. About 6 percent of families earning between \$24,600 and \$45,599 enrolled at least one child in a public district school. However, among families with an annual household income of \$45,600 or more, 8 percent enrolled at least one child in a public district school. In other words, relatively higher-income families were significantly more likely to enroll at least one child in a public district school than the lowest-income families—a suggestive disparity which may speak to the perceived quality of the district schools among families of varying income levels. (Note: Differences across racial/ethnic groups and income levels described in the body of the text here and hereafter are statistically significant at the 95 percent level of confidence.) Higher-income families tend to be able to afford to purchase homes in areas where the perceived quality of the district school is relatively high. Those families might feel more comfortable sending some of their children to the district school while seeking alternatives for some of their other children who might not be a good fit at the district school. Lower-income families, by contrast, may feel more pressure to avoid enrolling any of their children in the district school if they can help it due to perceived lower quality or other issues, such as safety.

Schooling and Scholarship Options

How Parents Initially Heard About the Private School Their Child Attends

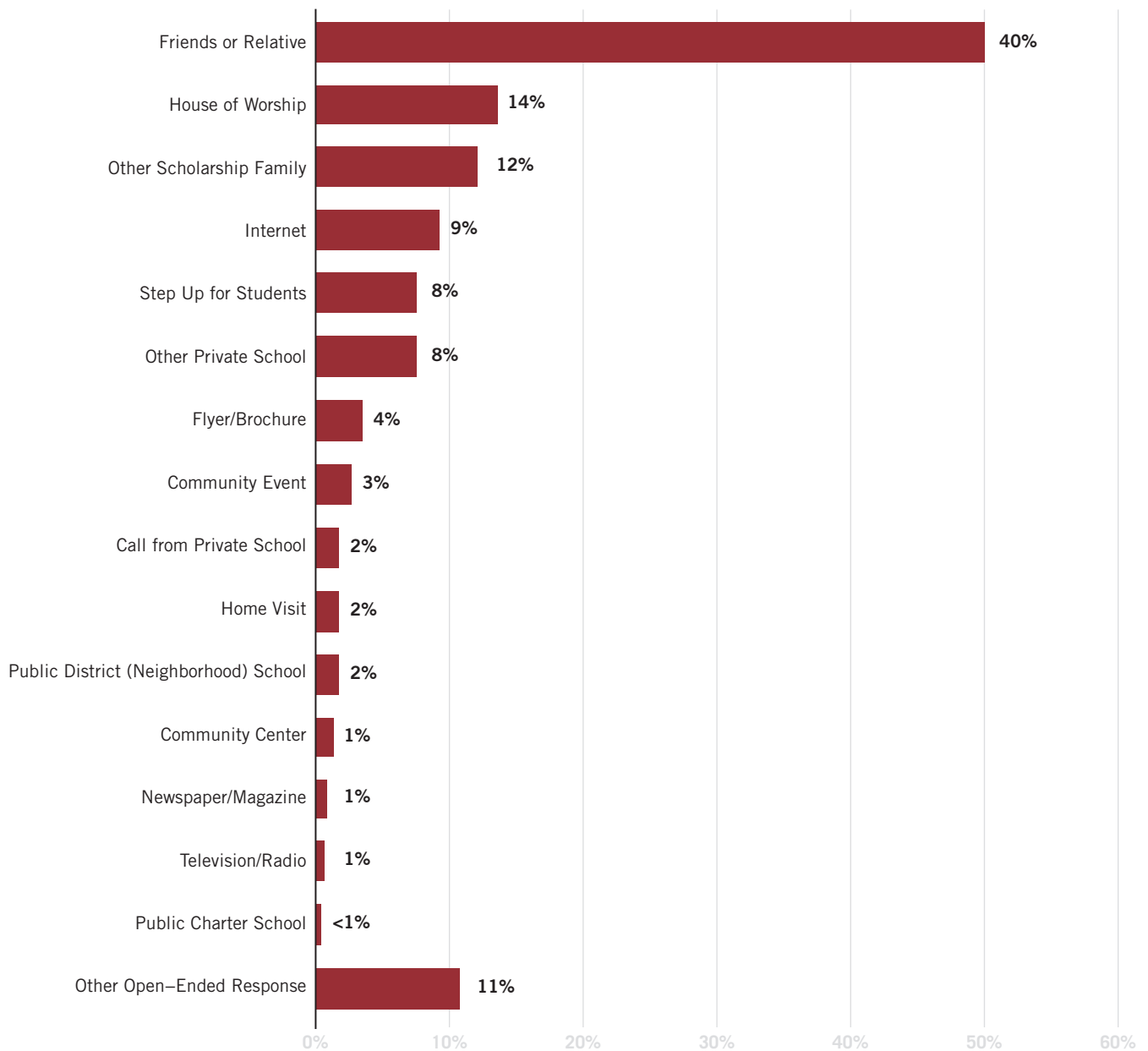
When searching for a school for their child, parents consult a wide variety of sources, but the ones they tend to trust most are those closest to them: friends and family. About three-fourths of scholarship parents reported they initially heard about the school their child currently attends through their own social network, including a friend or relative (50%), their house of worship (14%), and scholarship families (12%). The remainder reported that they initially

heard about their child’s school from a variety of sources outside their social network, including the internet (9%) and Step Up for Students (8%).

There were some differences among racial and ethnic groups regarding how they found out about their chosen school. White and Hispanic parents were significantly more likely to hear about their

school from their houses of worship (16% and 14%, respectively) than black parents (10%). Black and Hispanic parents were more likely than white parents to hear about their school from other scholarship families (13% to 15% versus 9%), the internet (9% to 11% versus 8%), and Step Up for Students (9% versus 5%).

FIGURE 3 How Parents Initially Heard About Their Chosen School



Number of Years Using a Scholarship

All 14,752 of the respondents reported applying for a scholarship from Step Up for Students for at least one child in the past two years. The vast majority of respondents (96%) were offered a scholarship while 4 percent were not (generally because they were ineligible). Of the 14,146 respondents offered scholarships, 97 percent said that they are currently using it for at least one child; 3 percent accepted it but withdrew from the program; and only 0.2 percent declined the scholarship.

As of the summer of 2017, more than one-fifth of current scholarship recipients (22%) reported that their child had been using a tax-credit scholarship for one year. A quarter of current scholarship recipients reported using a scholarship for two years; 18 percent used one for three years; 12 percent used one for four years; and 23 percent had been using a scholarship for five or more years. Only 1 percent reported using a scholarship for less than one year.

Among the 386 respondents who had withdrawn from the scholarship program, 21 percent reported using a tax-credit scholarship for less than one

year. About a quarter of those who withdrew from the program (24%) reported that their child had used a scholarship for one year; 21 percent had used one for two years; and 34 percent had used one for three or more years.

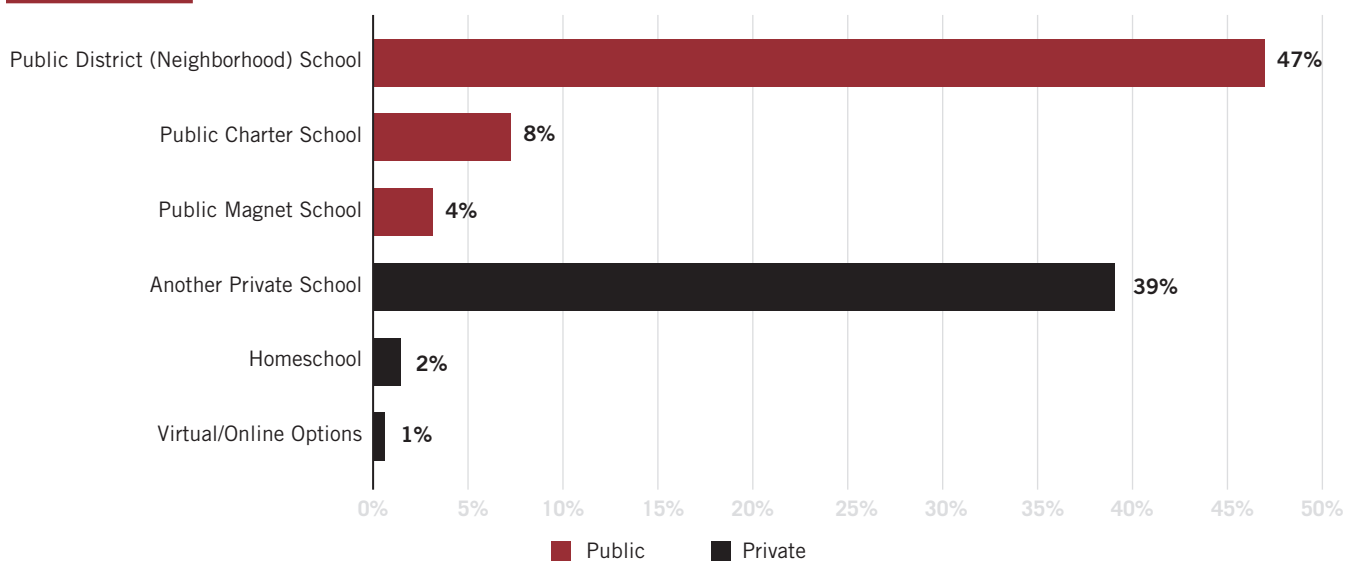
Previously Attended Schools

Among the scholarship students who had previously attended another school, most had previously enrolled in public-sector schools that did not charge tuition, indicating that the scholarships are expanding educational options. Slightly more than half of respondents (52%) reported that their child had previously been enrolled in another school prior to the one they currently attend. Of those children, nearly six in 10 were previously enrolled in some sort of public school, including traditional district schools (47%), public charter schools (8%), public magnet schools (4%), or the Florida Virtual School (1%). About four in 10 had previously been enrolled in another private school (39%) or had previously homeschooled (2%). These students may have attended their previous private schools using a scholarship (e.g., switching from a private elementary school to a private middle or high school).

FIGURE 4

Previous School Type

Percent of respondents whose child was enrolled in another school prior to their current one



Among families whose child was previously enrolled in another school, white parents were more likely than black or Hispanic families to have previously enrolled their children in a public district school (51% versus 45% and 46%, respectively) and less likely to have previously enrolled their children in another private school (34% versus 43% and 41%, respectively).

Alternatives to Program Participation

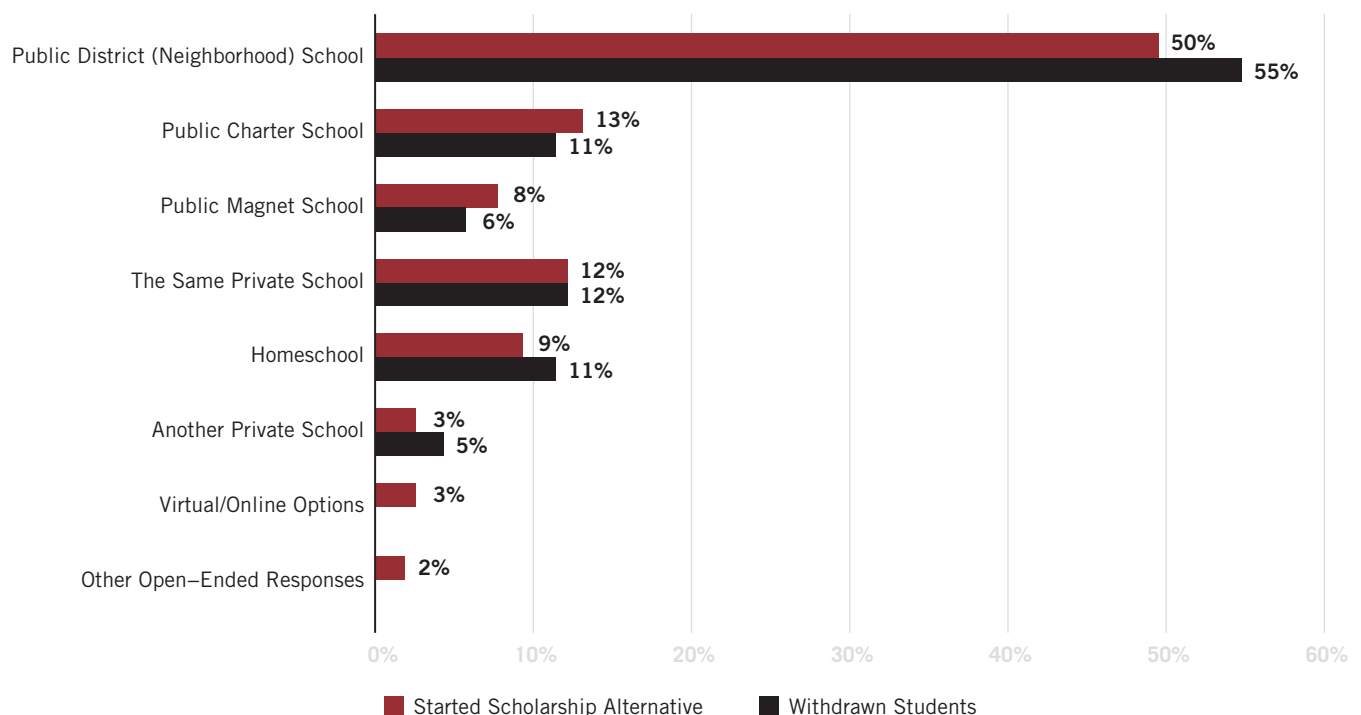
What if the scholarship program did not exist? When asked what type of school their child would attend if they were not using a tax-credit scholarship, most scholarship parents (71%) said that their child would be enrolled in some type of public school, including a traditional district school (50%), a public charter school (13%), or a public magnet school (8%). Fewer than 20 percent said that their child would still be enrolled in a private school without the scholarship, while 9 percent reported that without the scholarship, they would homeschool their child.

Lower-income families (those earning below \$24,600 annually) were more likely than relatively higher-income families (those earning \$45,600 and above) to say that, if they were not using a tax-credit scholarship, they would enroll their child in a public district school (53% versus 44%). Relatively higher-income families were also more likely to say that they would homeschool (15%) than lower-income families (7%). These responses indicate that the program is expanding educational opportunity to those who could not otherwise afford private school. Moreover, if the program did not exist, the public sector would bear the cost of educating most of the scholarship students.

The behavior of families who actually withdrew from the program generally aligned with what scholarship families said they would do if not using the scholarships. Among the 387 respondents who withdrew from the scholarship program, most (72%) subsequently enrolled their child in some type of public school, including a traditional district school (55%), a public charter school (11%), or a public magnet school (6%). Fewer than

FIGURE 5

Type of School Child Would Attend or Does Attend Without Scholarship



20 percent enrolled their child in a private school after withdrawing from the scholarship program, including 12 percent who remained in the same private school and 5 percent who enrolled in a different private school.²⁸ Additionally, 11 percent subsequently homeschooled their children.

The choices of families that withdrew from the program varied significantly based on income. The lowest-income families who withdrew from the scholarship program were much more likely to enroll their child in a public district school (69%) than relatively higher-income families (45%). Likewise, relatively higher-income families were more likely than the lowest-income families to remain in the same private school (20% versus 9%). Among the 340 respondents who withdrew from the program and enrolled their child in a different school, the most common reasons cited were problems with teachers/administrators, tuition/cost concerns, lack of extracurricular activities, academic quality, not enough individual attention, problems with other students (e.g., bullying), transportation, and poor discipline. The lowest-income families in the sample were about twice as likely as the relatively higher-income families to cite problems with teachers or administrators (33% versus 16%), although they were less likely to cite tuition/cost concerns (18% versus 31%).

Parents' Views of the Scholarship Program and Schooling Options

Parental Satisfaction with the Scholarship Program

The vast majority of scholarship parents (92%) expressed satisfaction with the tax-credit scholarship program, including 89 percent who were “completely satisfied” and 4 percent who were “somewhat satisfied.” Only 7 percent expressed being somewhat or completely dissatisfied. Fewer

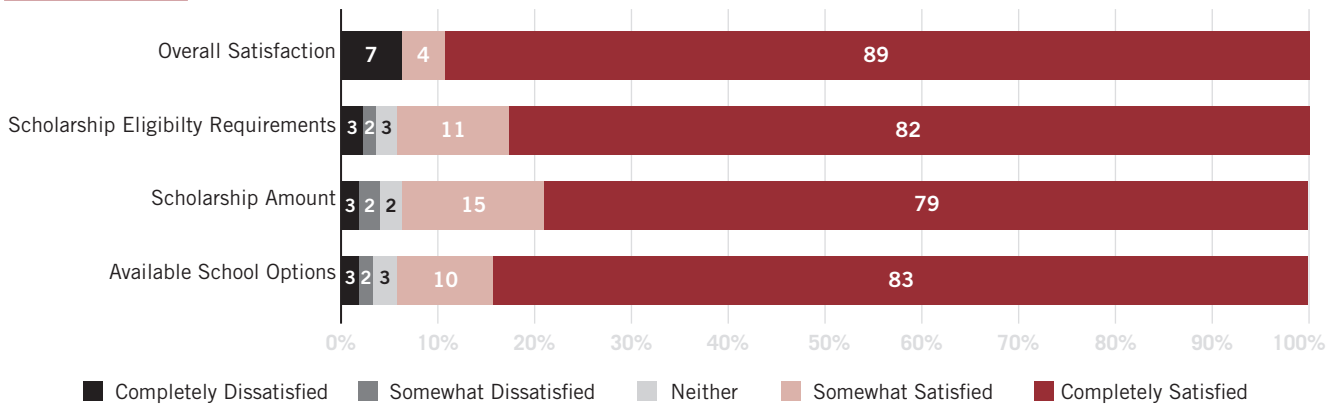
than 1 percent said they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. The levels of satisfaction were similar across income levels and racial and ethnic groups.

More than nine in 10 scholarship parents expressed satisfaction with each of three components of the program or related elements, including the scholarship eligibility requirements (93%), the scholarship amount (94%), and the available school options (93%). In each case, fewer than 5 percent expressed dissatisfaction. Of course, although the eligible families who were surveyed expressed great satisfaction with the eligibility requirements, it's likely that ineligible families would be considerably less satisfied.

Ease of Applying for Scholarships

Most applicants had little to no trouble applying for a scholarship, but there is some room for improvement. When asked about any difficulties associated with being approved for a scholarship through Step Up for Students, more than three out of four parents of students who had been awarded a scholarship (79%) reported having no difficulties.²⁹

Black and Hispanic families were more likely to report having no difficulties with the application process (83% each) compared with white families (74%). White families were more likely to report difficulty providing the documents needed for the application (15%) than black or Hispanic families (7% and 8%, respectively). Lower-income families (those earning less than \$24,600 annually) were also more likely to report having no difficulties with the application process than relatively higher-income families earning \$45,600 and above annually (80% compared to 71%). Meanwhile, higher-income families were more likely to have difficulty providing the documents needed for the application (17% versus 9%). Although these responses may appear counter-intuitive, it could be that lower-income families have more experience with preparing applications for means-tested benefits. According to Step Up for Students,

FIGURE 6Parental Satisfaction with Scholarship Program
(Percentage)

many of their lower-income families receive SNAP benefits and are on the direction certification list, which reduces the amount of paperwork that they are required to submit.

Ease of Finding a School with a Tax-Credit Scholarship

A scholarship is valuable only if parents can find a quality school at which to use it. Fortunately, nine out of 10 scholarship parents reported that it was very easy (73%) or easy (16%) to find a school where they wanted to enroll their child using a Step Up for Students scholarship. Although the vast majority of families found it easy to find the right school, relatively higher-income families were more likely to say it was very easy. Among families with an annual household income of less than \$24,600, 70 percent said finding a school was very easy compared with 74 percent of families earning between \$24,600 and \$30,099, 76 percent of families earning between \$30,100 and \$45,599, and 77 percent of families earning \$45,600 or more. Similarly, the vast majority of members of all races reported that it was easy to find a school where they wanted to enroll their child.

Among the 4 percent of all respondents who said it was somewhat or very difficult to find a school,

most families were dissatisfied with the options (or lack thereof) in their area, including 36 percent who cited the lack of private school options nearby, 20 percent who said that the available schools were not a good fit, and 12 percent who said that there was no space at the school they wanted their child to attend. Others had difficulty obtaining information about their options, including 17 percent who cited a lack of information on schools and 15 percent who reported difficulty determining which schools their child was eligible for. Additionally, 30 percent listed transportation challenges as a main reason they had difficulty finding a school. (Note: Respondents were given the option of selecting multiple options; see Table 4.)

Overall Parental Satisfaction with Their Child’s School

Nearly nine out of 10 parents (89%) expressed satisfaction with the school their child currently attends using a Step Up for Students scholarship, including 72 percent who were completely satisfied and 17 percent who were somewhat satisfied. Only 9 percent expressed dissatisfaction, including 4 percent who were somewhat dissatisfied and 4 percent who were completely dissatisfied. Only 3 percent said they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

TABLE 3 Ease of Application

Ease of Application	Total (N=14,119)	Race/Ethnicity			Household Income		
		White	Black	Hispanic	Below \$24,600	\$24,600 to \$45,599	\$45,600 and Above
There were no difficulties	79%	74%	83%	83%	80%	80%	71%
Difficulty providing documents needed for application	11%	15%	7%	8%	9%	10%	17%
Length of application	5%	5%	4%	4%	4%	4%	6%
Application deadlines	4%	3%	4%	3%	4%	3%	3%
Lack of access to a computer	4%	4%	4%	3%	5%	3%	2%
Confusing application	2%	3%	2%	2%	2%	2%	3%
Difficulty understanding eligibility	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	3%
Language barriers	1%	<1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%
Other Open-ended response	3%	4%	2%	2%	2%	3%	5%
Sample size	14,119	4,452	4,040	3,740	4,943	6,212	1,875

Source: EdChoice, 2017 Survey of Florida Tax-Credit Scholarship Families (conducted July 5–August 17, 2017)

Q 25: What difficulties, if any, were associated with being approved for an FTC scholarship through Step Up for Students? Please select all that apply.

Note: Shown to respondents who are currently using or withdrew from the scholarship

FIGURE 7 Ease of Finding a School Using a Scholarship

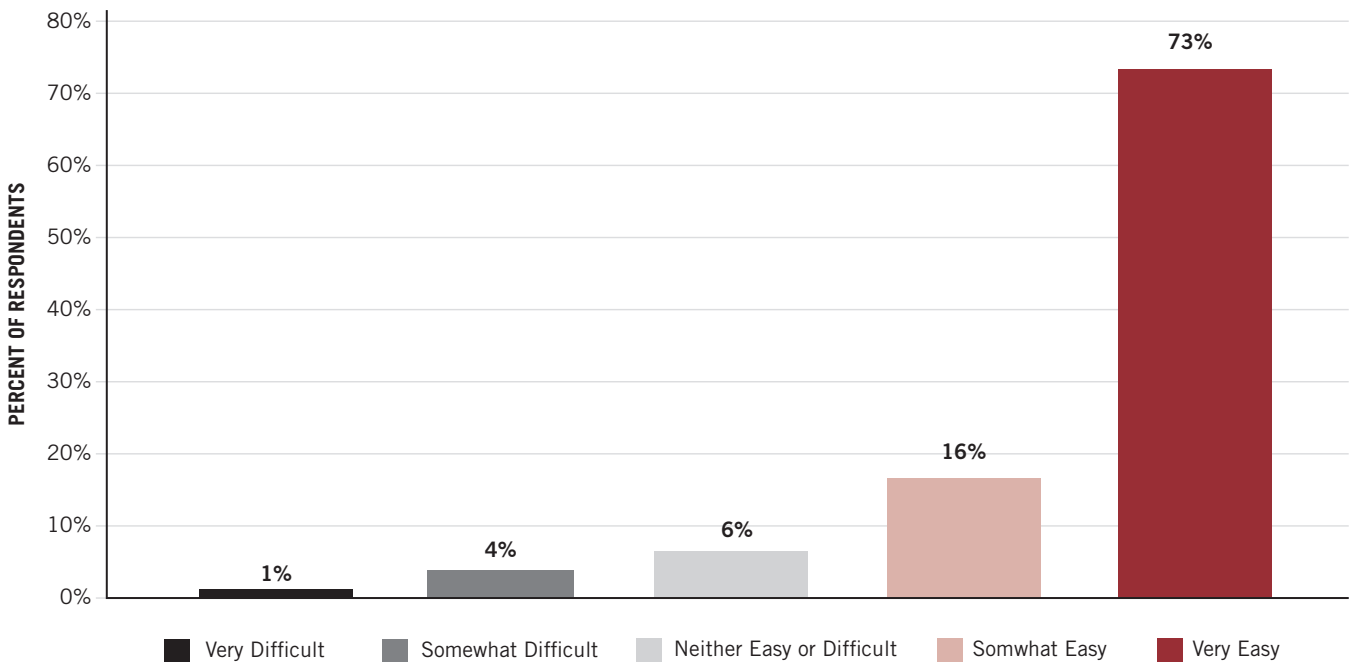


TABLE 4 Types of Difficulties Finding a School

Types of Difficulties	Percent of Respondents (N = 1,464)
Lack of private school options nearby	36%
Transportation challenges	30%
Available schools were not a good fit	20%
Lack of information on schools	17%
Difficulty determining which schools my child was eligible for	15%
No space at the school I wanted my child to attend	12%
Other open-ended response	16%

Source: EdChoice, 2017 Survey of Florida Tax-Credit Scholarship Families (conducted July 5–August 17, 2017)

Q 14: Why was finding a school not easy? Please select all that apply.

Note: Shown to respondents who selected "very difficult," "difficult," or "neither easy nor difficult" for the previous question

Although the vast majority of parents from all levels of income and all races or ethnicities were satisfied with their chosen school, relatively higher-income families and whites were more likely to report being completely satisfied. Among families with an annual household income of at least \$45,699, 75 percent were completely satisfied compared to 71 percent of those earning less than \$24,600 annually. White parents were also more likely to be satisfied and less likely to be dissatisfied than non-white parents. Among white parents, 92 percent were satisfied with their chosen school (including 78% who were completely satisfied) compared to 90 percent of Hispanic parents (including 74% who were completely satisfied) and 90 percent of black parents (including 67% who were completely satisfied). Likewise, only 6 percent of white parents were somewhat or completely dissatisfied compared to 8 percent of Hispanic parents and 10 percent of black parents.

Among the 340 parents who withdrew their child from the scholarship program and enrolled their child in another school, about four in 10 said

they were more satisfied with their child's new school relative to their previous school, including 26 percent who were much more satisfied and 16 percent who were somewhat more satisfied. About three in 10 were less satisfied with their new school relative to the school their child previously attended with a scholarship, including 15 percent who were much less satisfied and 16 percent who were somewhat less satisfied. More than a quarter of these respondents (28%) said they were equally satisfied.

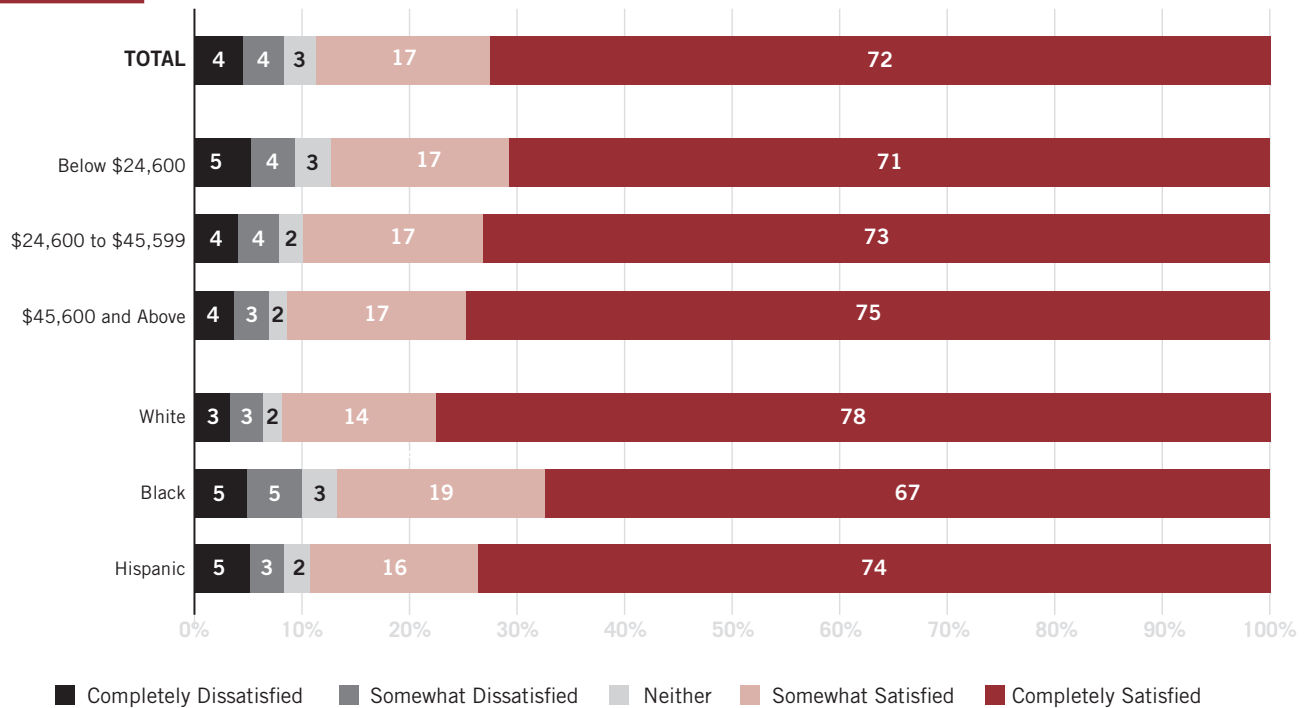
Parental Views of Their Child's School Environment

Parents were generally very satisfied with the learning environments provided by the schools they chose for their children. The vast majority of parents completely agreed or somewhat agreed that, at their child's school, teachers treat students of all races with respect (93%); students are safe in the hallways (95%); teachers care about their students (94%); students care about each other (91%); students get along with each other (91%); students respect others who are different (90%); the parent is pleased with school discipline (91%); teachers listen to students when they have problems (90%); teachers work closely with parents to help students when they have problems (91%); and the parent is satisfied with the education their child gets (93%). Though the majority of parents (72%) completely or somewhat disagreed with the statement "students threaten and bully each other," 17 percent completely or somewhat agreed, and 11 percent neither agreed nor disagreed.

Although the vast majority of black parents gave high marks to their chosen schools along the criteria outlined above, they were somewhat less positive than white or Hispanic parents. The majority of black parents completely agreed or somewhat agreed that, at their child's school, teachers treat students of all races with respect (90%); students are safe in the hallways (94%); teachers care about their students (93%); students care about each

FIGURE 8

Parental Satisfaction with Chosen School
(Percentage by Race/Income)



other (89%); students get along with each other (90%); students respect others who are different (88%); the parent is pleased with school discipline (89%); teachers listen to students when they have problems (88%); teachers work closely with parents to help students when they have problems (90%); and the parent is satisfied with the education their child gets (92%). Likewise, although still a majority, fewer black parents (69%) completely or somewhat disagreed with the statement “students threaten and bully each other” than white or Hispanic parents, and a slightly higher proportion of black parents (19%) completely or somewhat agreed, while 12 percent neither agreed nor disagreed.

Parents were also generally happy with their child’s behavior and level of engagement in their chosen school. The vast majority of parents completely or somewhat agreed that their child tries his or her best in school (97%), pays attention in class (95%), feels happy in school (93%), stays out of trouble at school (95%), and likes the school (94%).

Overall, 93 percent of parents completely or somewhat agreed with the statement, “I like this

school.” White and Hispanic parents were slightly more likely to say they liked their child’s school (95% and 94%, respectively) than black parents (92%), though more than nine out of 10 of parents of all races and ethnicities liked their child’s school.

Factors Parents Consider When Choosing Schools

Parents consider a variety of different factors when choosing a private school for their child. When asked to list the top three factors that influenced their decision to have their child attend their chosen school, the only factors to be selected by a majority of parents of scholarship recipients were religious environment/instruction (66%) and morals/character/values instruction (52%). These two highly influential factors were followed by a safe environment (39%), academic reputation (34%), small classes (31%), small school (21%), close to home and/or work (19%), discipline (16%), individual attention (15%), extracurricular activities offered (8%), diversity (5%), and, for a very small percentage of parents, standardized test

scores (4%).

The 340 parents who withdrew their children from the program and enrolled them in a different school had somewhat different priorities when selecting a school. These priorities may have been influenced

by what they believed their child’s previous school

was lacking, or were possibly related to convenience or cost. When asked to list the top three factors that influenced their decision to have their child attend their chosen school, the most popular answers were that the new school was close to home and/or work (47%), academics (45%), or that it was their child’s residentially assigned district school (39%).

TABLE 5

Parental Views of School Environment

Percent of respondents somewhat or completely agreeing

	Total (N=14,119)	Race/Ethnicity			Household Income		
		White	Black	Hispanic	Below \$24,600	\$24,600 to \$45,599	\$45,600 and Above
My child tries his/her best in school	97%	96%	97%	97%	97%	97%	96%
My child stays out of trouble at school	95%	96%	94%	95%	94%	96%	96%
My child pays attention in class	95%	95%	94%	96%	94%	95%	95%
Students are safe in hallways	95%	96%	94%	95%	94%	95%	96%
Teachers care about their students	94%	96%	93%	94%	93%	95%	95%
My child feels happy in school	94%	95%	92%	95%	93%	94%	95%
My child likes this school	94%	95%	91%	95%	93%	94%	94%
I am satisfied with the education students get	93%	95%	92%	94%	93%	94%	94%
I like this school	93%	95%	92%	94%	93%	94%	94%
Teachers treat students of all races with respect	93%	95%	90%	95%	92%	93%	94%
Teachers work closely with parents to help students when they have problems	91%	93%	90%	92%	91%	92%	92%
I am pleased with school discipline	91%	92%	89%	93%	91%	91%	92%
Students care about each other	91%	93%	89%	92%	90%	92%	91%
Students get along with each other	91%	93%	90%	91%	90%	92%	92%
Teachers listen to students when they have problems	90%	93%	88%	91%	89%	91%	92%
Students respect others who are different	90%	92%	88%	92%	89%	91%	91%
Students threaten and bully each other (% Disagree)	72%	75%	69%	73%	71%	73%	75%
Sample size	14,750	4,551	4,179	4,049	5,199	6,461	1,935

Source: EdChoice, 2017 Survey of Florida Tax-Credit Scholarship Families (conducted July 5–August 17, 2017)

Q 31: Thinking about your child’s school, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Please select all that apply.

Notes: Shown to respondents who are currently using or withdrew from the scholarship

Parental Involvement

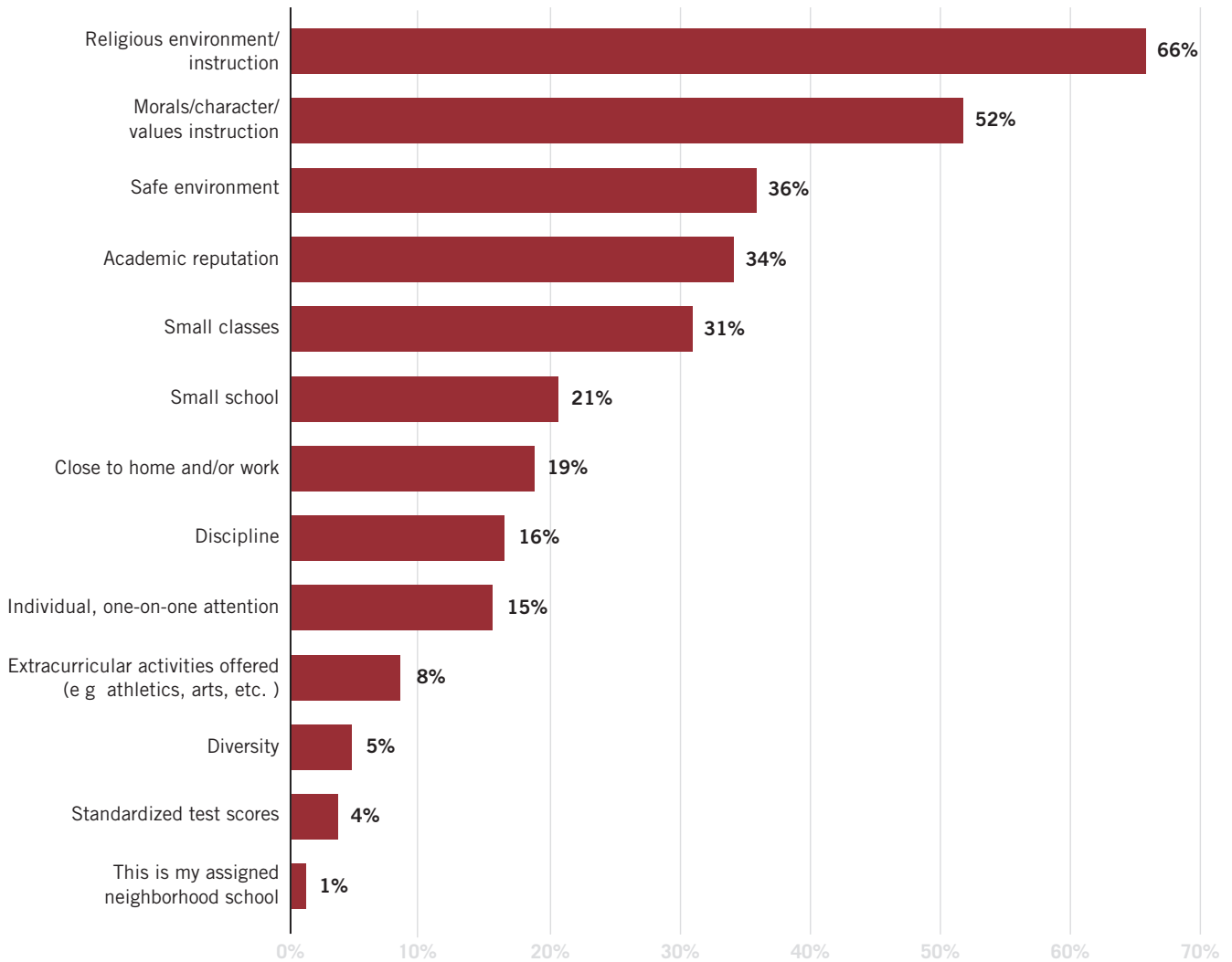
A child’s learning environment can also affect his or her home environment. When children change schools, their parents’ education-related behaviors may change as well. The following sections detail what parents reported they do to support their child’s education and how their behaviors changed after receiving a scholarship for their child to attend the school they chose.

Parental Efforts to Support Their Child’s Education

Most of the parents reported engaging in some sort of activity or paying for a service to support their child’s K–12 education for at least four months of a school year, including helping with homework at least one night per week (73%), paying for before- or after-care services (40%), significantly changing their daily routine (38%), having a family member or friend look after a child (37%), paying for transportation to/from school (23%), or paying for tutoring (22%). Only 8 percent answered “none of the above.”

FIGURE 9

What Parents Want from Schools (Top Three)



Parental behaviors varied across income levels and racial and ethnic groups. Relatively higher-income families (those earning at least \$45,600 annually) were more likely than lower-income families (those earning under \$24,600 annually) to report helping with homework at least once per week (81% versus 67%), having a family member help look after a child (40% versus 35%), and significantly change their daily routine to support their child’s education (44% versus 36%). Lower-income families were more likely than relatively higher-income families to report paying for their child’s transportation to or from school (26% versus 21%).

Black and white parents were more likely to report having a family member help look after a child (41% and 40% respectively) than Hispanic parents (28%). White parents were the most likely to report helping with homework at least once a week (83%), followed by black parents (74%) and Hispanic parents (60%). White parents were also the most likely to report significantly changing their daily routine (43%), followed by black parents (37%) and Hispanic parents (32%). Black parents were the most likely to report paying for their child’s transportation to or from school (32%), followed by white parents (22%) and Hispanic parents

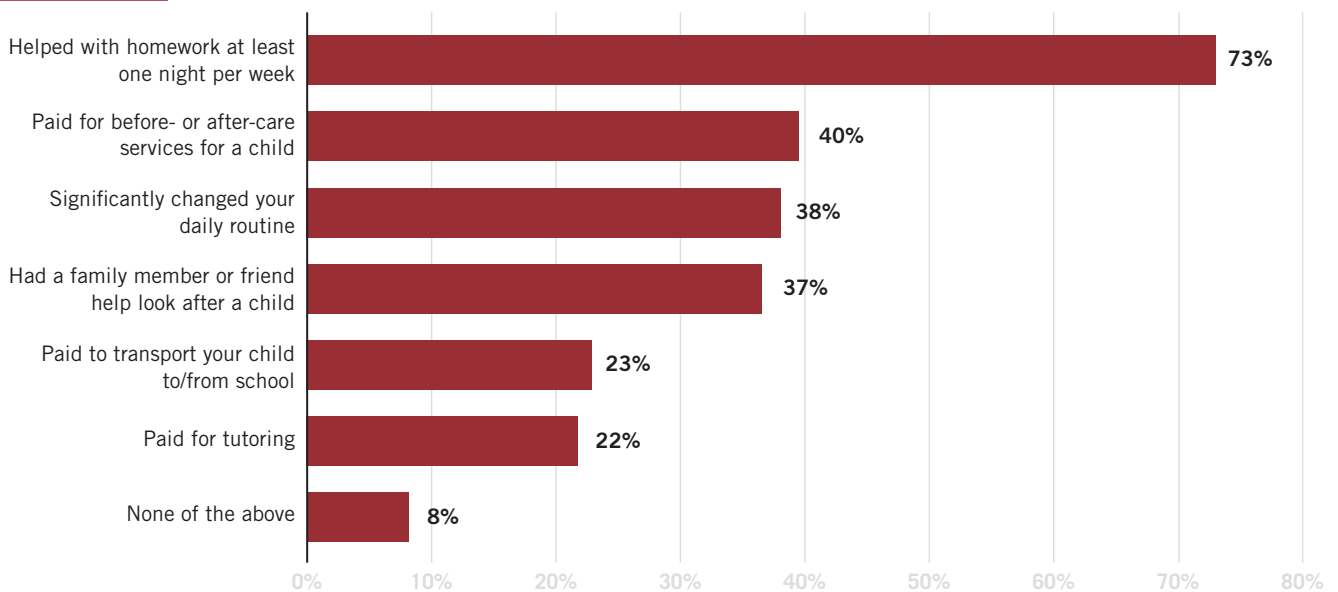
(16%). Likewise, black parents were the most likely to report paying for before- or after-care services (47%), followed by white parents (38%) and Hispanic parents (34%). Black parents were also the most likely to report paying for tutoring (26%), followed by Hispanic parents (22%) and white parents (19%).

Some of the parents even made significant life changes to support their child’s education, such as taking on a part-time or other job for additional income (32%), changing their job (22%), or taking out a new loan (7%). Parents reporting annual household income of \$45,600 and above were the most likely to report taking on a part-time or other job for additional income (41%), while the lowest-income families were least likely to do so (30%).

Changes in Parental Behavior After Changing Schools

Among respondents whose child was previously enrolled in a public district or charter school before using a scholarship to enroll in a private school, most parents reported engaging in a variety of

FIGURE 10 Parental Support for Child’s Education



education-related activities more often than before switching schools, including: communicating with teachers (77%), participating in school activities (72%), volunteering or doing community service (63%), reading to their child (57%), using an online educational resource like Khan Academy (56%), and working on math homework with their child (52%). The extent to which parents reported changing their behaviors after switching from a public school to a private school varied by income level and racial and ethnic group. Lower-income parents were more likely to say that they read with their child more often at the new school (60%) than relatively higher-income parents (50%), worked on math homework with their child much more often (54% versus 45%), and use an online educational resource much more often (39% versus 31%). Black and Hispanic parents were more likely to say that they read with their child more often at the new school (59% and 64%, respectively) than white parents (50%), worked on math homework with their child much more often (58% of black parents and 55% of Hispanic parents versus 45% of white parents), and used an online educational resource much more often (58% of

black parents and 62% of Hispanic parents versus 51% of white parents). White and Hispanic parents were more likely to say they participated in school activities more often at the new school (74% and 75%, respectively) than black parents (58%), and volunteered or participated in community service more often (62% of white parents and 68% of Hispanic parents versus 58% of black parents).

Transportation

Transportation is one of the top challenges many families face when trying to exercise school choice. As noted in the “Ease of Finding a School with a Tax-Credit Scholarship” section starting on page 15, among the 4 percent of all respondents who said it was somewhat or very difficult to find a school, 30 percent listed transportation challenges as a main reason they had difficulty finding a school. Most private school families are personally responsible for ensuring that their child gets to and from school (less than 1 percent of all respondents).

TABLE 6

Increase in Activities to Support Child's Education After Receiving Scholarship

	Total	Race/Ethnicity			Household Income		
		White	Black	Hispanic	Below \$24,600	\$24,600 to \$45,999	\$45,600 and Above
Communicating with teachers (email, phone, etc.)	77%	81%	74%	77%	76%	77%	82%
Participating in school activities	72%	74%	67%	75%	70%	72%	74%
Volunteering / community service	63%	62%	58%	68%	64%	62%	61%
Reading with or to your child	57%	50%	59%	64%	60%	56%	50%
Using an online educational resource (e.g., Khan Academy)	56%	51%	58%	62%	57%	55%	55%
Working on math homework with your child	52%	45%	58%	55%	53%	52%	45%
Sample size	3,796	1,229	1,085	1,023	1,381	1,676	484

Source: EdChoice, 2017 Survey of Florida Tax-Credit Scholarship Families (conducted July 5–August 17, 2017)

Q 20: After enrolling your child in a private school using a Step Up for Students scholarship, how did your participation in the following activities change (compared to when your child was in a public or charter school)? Notes: Shown to respondents who are currently using or withdrew from the scholarship

Notes: Shown to respondents whose child was previously enrolled in a public school. Combined responses for "somewhat more often" and "much more often."

When asked how their children get to school most days, the vast majority of all scholarship parents (80%) reported that a family member drives their child to school. Another 2 percent reported that their child drives himself or herself to school or carpools with a friend, and 4 percent said that someone else drives them. Only a small number said their child rides a school bus (5%) or takes some form of public transportation (1%). Additionally, 2 percent reported that their child walks to school and 6 percent said they get to school some other way.

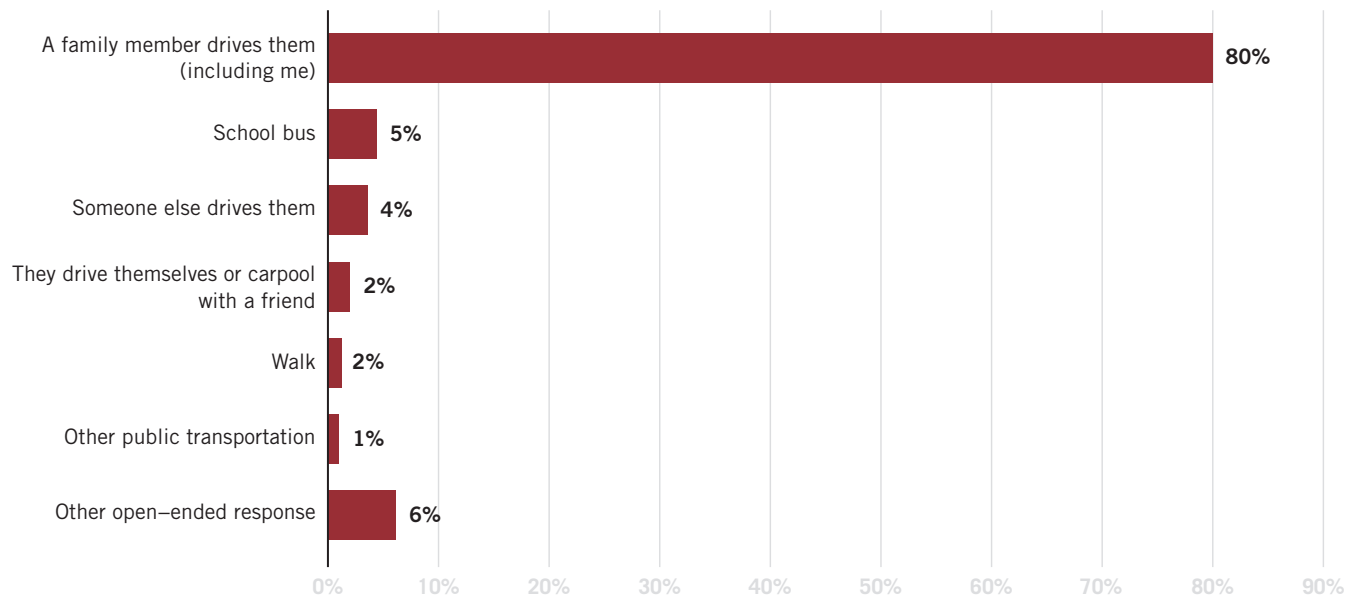
The mix of transportation methods employed varied by income level and racial and ethnic group. Parents from households earning at least \$45,699 annually were more likely to have a family member drive their child (87%) than families earning less than \$24,600 annually (76%). White parents were the most likely to say that a family member drives their child to school (86%), followed by Hispanic parents (81%) and black parents (73%).

A majority of parents (57%) reported that their child spends 15 minutes or less commuting to school one

way, including 31 percent who said the trip takes 10 to 15 minutes and 26 percent who said it takes less than 10 minutes. Nearly all the parents said their child's one-way commute takes 45 minutes or fewer, including 19 percent who said it takes 16 to 20 minutes, 15 percent who said it takes 21 to 30 minutes, and 7 percent who said it takes 31 to 45 minutes. Additionally, 2 percent reported one-way commutes lasting 46 minutes to an hour and less than 1 percent said it took more than one hour.

Time is a precious and limited resource. Although all parents want their child to attend a school that's the right fit, sometimes that school isn't just around the corner. Parents educating their children outside the district school system often have to balance the demands of work and home life with their child's transportation needs. Asked how much time they'd be willing to commute one way to have their child attend a different school that might be a better fit, the majority (69%) reported that they'd be willing to drive at least 16 minutes, including 22 percent who said 16 to 20 minutes, 28 percent who said 21 to 30 minutes, 12 percent who said 31 to 45 minutes, 5.2 percent who said 46 minutes to an hour, and 2 percent who said more

FIGURE 11 Usual Mode of Transportation to School



than an hour. Fewer than a third were not willing to commute more than 15 minutes, including 22 who said 10 to 15 minutes, and 9 percent who said fewer than 10 minutes.

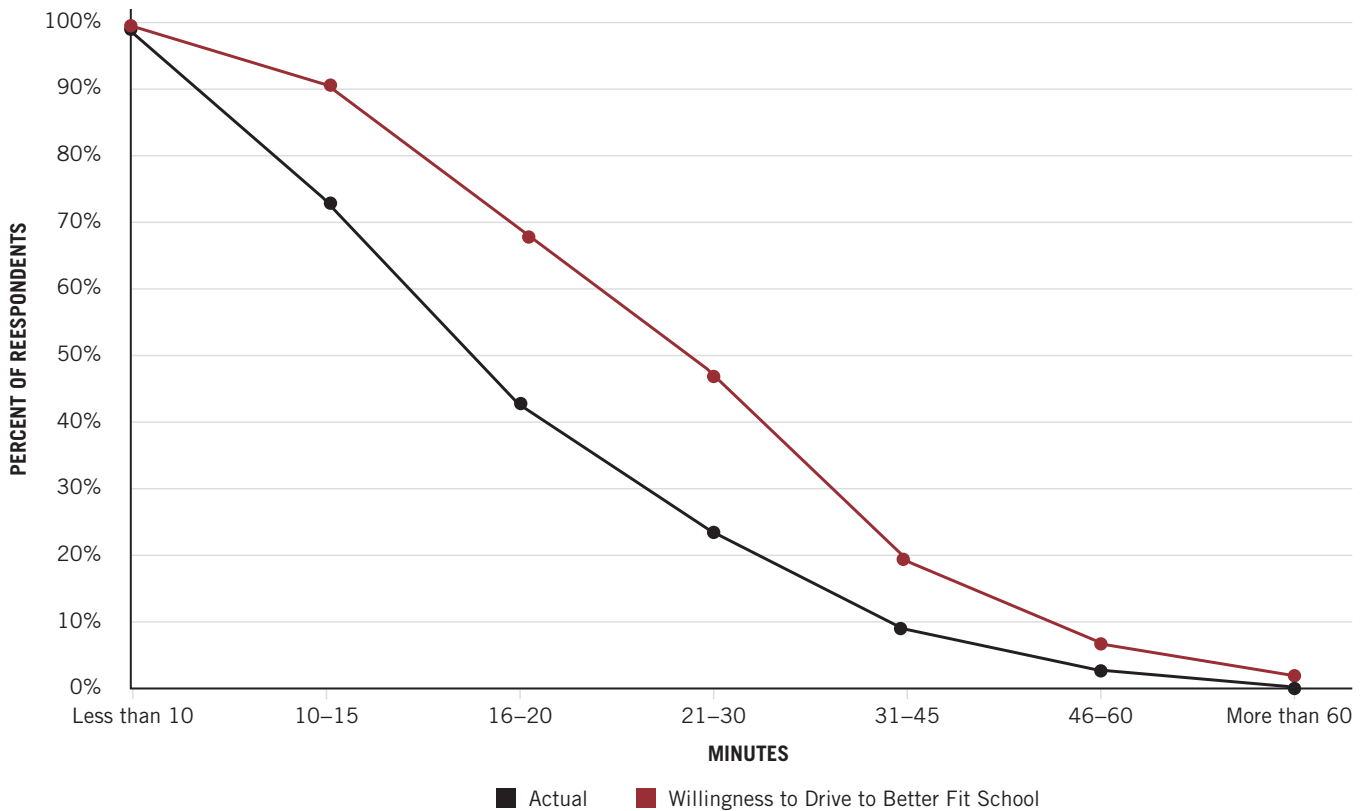
POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Florida’s tax-credit scholarships expand educational opportunity for the state’s most disadvantaged students. The scholarships go to children who are disproportionately low-income, non-white, and lower-performing on standardized tests before entering the program than their demographic peers. The scholarship families are highly satisfied with both the scholarship program and the schools the scholarships empower them to choose.

This survey of the parents participating in the Florida tax-credit scholarship program is aimed to better understand how and why Florida’s scholarship families exercise their freedom to choose their child’s school and how satisfied they are with the program and their chosen schools. It is the largest ever conducted of families participating in a private school choice program. As such, it represents some of the strongest evidence to date of the educational priorities of parents who have access to a school choice program when selecting a school for their child.

The high level of satisfaction alone is compelling evidence of the success of the program, but additional context is necessary to understand why parents are satisfied. The survey reveals that parents are pleased with a wide variety of measures of performance: the quality of education provided, student safety and discipline, how teachers treat and care for students, how students treat and care

FIGURE 12 Time Spent Commuting to School (Minutes)



for each other, how teachers and staff work with parents to address problems that arise, and more.

As with previous research, we find that parents highly value a religious environment/instruction (66%) and morals/character/values instruction (52%) when choosing a school for their child. Other factors parents frequently cited include providing a safe environment (36%), academic reputation (34%), and small classes (31%). Contrary to the heavy emphasis that policymakers often place on standardized tests, only 4 percent of parents ranked test scores as one of the top three factors they considered when choosing a school. Although parents may consider test scores as a part of the school's general academic reputation, it's clear that parents are much more concerned that schools provide a well-rounded education that includes moral and character instruction. More than merely wanting schools that produce good students, parents want schools that produce students who are good.

Of course, character formation and academic success depend on what goes on at home as well as at school. Interestingly, parents report that using the scholarships to change schools coincided with changes in how they worked to assist their child's education. A majority of parents who switched their child from a public school to a private school using a scholarship reported that they were more likely to communicate with teachers, participate in school activities, do community service, read to their child, use online educational resources, and help their child with math homework than they did previously.

The benefits of exercising school choice can only be realized if parents can find a school that they believe meets their child's needs. Fortunately, nine out of 10 families said it was easy to find the right school. Half of parents reported first learning about their chosen school from a friend or relative. Other popular sources of information included houses of worship, other scholarship families, and the internet. Although these means of communication

have been sufficient to keep the program operating at maximum capacity, it also shows that there is room for policymakers and school leaders to explore additional means of informing families about their schooling options.

Although fewer than one in 20 families reported difficulties finding a school that was a good fit, one-third of those families listed transportation as a significant challenge. The scholarship program already offers transportation to out-of-district public schools. Policymakers should consider re-enabling scholarship-funding organizations to provide similar funds for transportation to any chosen scholarship school.³⁰

Of particular note to policymakers, more than half of scholarship parents reported that their child had been enrolled in a public district or charter school before applying for a scholarship. When asked what type of school their child would attend if they were not using a scholarship, seven in 10 scholarship parents reported that their child would attend some type of public school. Moreover, the schooling choices of families who withdrew from the program closely matches the stated preferences of participating families. This should put to rest claims by some critics of the scholarship program that it supposedly only serves students who would attend private school anyway.

Overall, the survey shows that parents value the opportunity to choose a school they believe is a good fit for their child. Although Florida's tax-credit scholarship program serves more than 100,000 students—making it the largest private school choice program in the country—it is still restricted to a small percentage of Florida's 2.6 million K–12 students. All families should have the opportunity to choose the learning environment that's the right fit for their child, regardless of their income. Given the success of the scholarship program, policymakers should consider expanding it so that all children can benefit from being in the learning environment that's right for them.

CONCLUSION

This census of Step Up for Students scholarship families is the largest survey to date of parents with children participating in a private school choice program. As such, the findings should be of particular interest to policymakers in Florida and in other states considering the adoption of school choice programs.

Florida's tax-credit scholarship program is helping a large number of disadvantaged students gain access to an education that is a better fit for them. Students receiving tax-credit scholarships from Step Up for Students tend to be less advantaged, less affluent, and more racially and ethnically diverse than the general K-12 population in Florida. Working in conjunction with Hanover Research and Step Up for Students, we find, based on more than 14,000 responses, that participating families are highly satisfied with the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program and the schools they are able to choose using their scholarships.

The TCS program is increasing the educational opportunities available to families in the Sunshine State. Fewer than two in 10 scholarship parents reported, for example, that their child would still be enrolled in a private school without the scholarship. And critically, we find that parents prize many of the intangible benefits schools offer to children, while placing much less importance on standardized tests. We find that parents highly value a religious environment/instruction (66%) and morals/character/values instruction (52%) when choosing a school for their child. The least important factor selected by parents was how their child's chosen school performed on standardized test scores (4%). Policymakers, therefore, should exercise caution when wielding the regulatory pen. Policymakers should strive to establish a free and open environment in which private schools of all types can operate according to their mission, enabling parents to select into schools that match well with their family's values and aspirations for their children.

We hope that policymakers and the public at large will find this survey informative and useful. We also hope it spurs further research into the preferences and experiences of families with school-aged children.

APPENDIX 1

Survey Project and Profile

TITLE: 2017–18 Survey of Florida Tax-Credit Scholarship Families

SURVEY SPONSOR: EdChoice

SURVEY DEVELOPER: EdChoice

**SURVEY DATA COLLECTION AND
QUALITY CONTROL:**

Hanover Research

INTERVIEW DATES: July 5 to August 17, 2017

INTERVIEW METHOD: Web, Direct email to Step Up for Students scholarship families

INTERVIEW LENGTH: 11.98 minutes (median)

LANGUAGE(S): English and Spanish

SAMPLING METHOD: Census of Step Up for Students Scholarship Families

POPULATION SAMPLE: Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program families that applied for a scholarship from Step Up for Students

SAMPLE SIZE: 14,752 tax-credit scholarship applicants

MARGINS OF ERROR: +/- 0.77 percent

RESPONSE RATES: 22.2 percent

WEIGHTING?: No

OVERSAMPLING?: No

APPENDIX 2

Additional Tables

How Parents Initially Heard About Their Chosen School

(By Race/Income)

	Overall	White	Black	Hispanic	Below \$24,600	\$24,600 to \$45,999	\$45,600 and Above
Friends or Relatives	50%	49%	50%	50%	49%	50%	49%
House of Worship	14%	16%	10%	14%	13%	13%	17%
Other Scholarship Family	12%	9%	15%	13%	13%	12%	10%
Internet	9%	8%	9%	11%	10%	9%	9%
Step Up for Students	8%	5%	9%	9%	9%	7%	5%
Other Private School	8%	7%	8%	8%	8%	7%	7%
Flyer / Brochure	4%	2%	5%	4%	4%	3%	2%
Community Event	3%	2%	3%	3%	3%	3%	2%
Home Visit	2%	1%	2%	2%	2%	1%	1%
Call from School	2%	1%	2%	2%	2%	2%	1%
Public District (Neighborhood) School	2%	1%	2%	1%	2%	2%	1%
Community Center	1%	1%	1%	1%	2%	1%	1%
Newspaper/Magazine	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%
Television/Radio	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%
Public Charter School	0%	0%	1%	0%	1%	<1%	<1%
Other	11%	13%	9%	9%	10%	11%	12%
Sample Size	14,119	4,452	4,040	3,740	4,943	6,212	1,875

Source: EdChoice, 2017 Survey of Florida Tax-Credit Scholarship Families (conducted July 5–August 17, 2017)

Q 17: How did you initially hear about this school? Please check all that apply.

Note: Shown to respondents who are currently using or withdrew from the scholarship

Parental Satisfaction with Scholarship Program

(By Race/Income)

	Overall	White	Black	Hispanic	Below \$24,600	\$24,600 to \$45,599	\$45,600 and Above
Completely Satisfied	73%	80%	71%	71%	70%	75%	77%
Somewhat Satisfied	16%	14%	17%	17%	17%	16%	15%
Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	6%	4%	7%	7%	7%	6%	5%
Somewhat Dissatisfied	4%	2%	4%	4%	4%	3%	3%
Completely Dissatisfied	1%	<1%	1%	1%	1%	0%	<1%
Sample Size	14,046	4,429	4,018	3,723	4,912	6,180	1,870

Source: EdChoice, 2017 Survey of Florida Tax-Credit Scholarship Families (conducted July 5–August 17, 2017)

Q 23: In general, how satisfied are/were you with the Step Up for Students scholarship program? *Note:* Shown to respondents who are currently using or withdrew from the scholarship

Note: Shown to respondents who are currently using or withdrew from the scholarship

Parental Satisfaction with Aspects of the Scholarship Program

(By Race/Income)

	Overall	White	Black	Hispanic	Below \$24,600	\$24,600 to \$45,599	\$45,600 and Above
Scholarship Eligibility Requirements	82%	93%	94%	94%	95%	94%	91%
Scholarship Amount	79%	94%	94%	94%	94%	94%	93%
Available School Options	83%	94%	93%	93%	92%	93%	94%
Sample Size	13,856 / 13,871 / 13,654	4,387 / 4,406 / 4,289	3,959 / 3,725 / 3,982	3,673 / 3,680 / 3,632	4,848 / 4,832 / 4,789	6,107 / 6,135 / 6,024	1,853 / 1,858 / 1,814

Source: EdChoice, 2017 Survey of Florida Tax-Credit Scholarship Families (conducted July 5–August 17, 2017)

Q 24: Thinking about the following measures, how satisfied are/were you with the different aspects of the Step Up for Students scholarship program?

Notes: Shown to respondents who are currently using or withdrew from the scholarship. Figures represent combined totals for respondents answering "completely satisfied" and "somewhat satisfied."

Ease of Finding a School Using a Scholarship

(By Race/Income)

	Overall	White	Black	Hispanic	Below \$24,600	\$24,600 to \$45,599	\$45,600 and Above
Very Easy	73%	80%	71%	71%	70%	75%	77%
Somewhat Easy	16%	14%	17%	17%	17%	16%	15%
Neither Easy nor Difficult	6%	4%	7%	7%	7%	6%	5%
Somewhat Difficult	4%	2%	4%	4%	4%	3%	3%
Very Difficult	1%	<1%	1%	1%	1%	0%	<1%
Sample Size	1,412	4,452	4,040	3,740	4,943	6,212	1,875

Source: EdChoice, 2017 Survey of Florida Tax-Credit Scholarship Families (conducted July 5–August 17, 2017)

Q 13: How easy was it for you to find a school where you wanted to enroll your child using a Step Up for Students scholarship?

Note: Shown to respondents who are currently using or withdrew from the scholarship

Parental Support for Child's Education

(By Race/Income)

	Overall	White	Black	Hispanic	Below \$24,600	\$24,600 to \$45,599	\$45,600 and Above
Helped with homework at least one night per week	73%	83%	74%	60%	67%	75%	81%
Paid for before or after care services for a child	40%	38%	47%	34%	37%	44%	39%
Significantly changed your daily routine	38%	43%	37%	32%	36%	38%	44%
Had a family member or friend help look after a child	37%	40%	41%	28%	35%	38%	40%
Paid for transporting your child to/from school	23%	22%	31%	16%	26%	23%	21%
Paid for tutoring	22%	19%	26%	21%	21%	23%	24%
None of the above	8%	6%	6%	13%	10%	7%	6%
Sample Size	14,752	4,553	4,179	4,049	5,200	6,462	1,935

Source: EdChoice, 2017 Survey of Florida Tax-Credit Scholarship Families (conducted July 5–August 17, 2017)

Q 33: Have you ever done any of the following things to support your child's K–12 education for at least four months of a school year? Please check all that apply.

Note: Parents were asked if they engaged in any of the above activities for at least four months of a school year.

Financial Support for Child's Education

(By Race/Income)

	Overall	White	Black	Hispanic	Below \$24,600	\$24,600 to \$45,599	\$45,600 and Above
Taken on a part-time or other job for additional income	32%	39%	30%	27%	30%	33%	41%
Changed your job	22%	24%	22%	20%	21%	23%	26%
Taken out a new loan	7%	7%	7%	7%	6%	8%	8%
None of the above	51%	47%	52%	56%	55%	50%	41%
Sample Size	14,752	4,553	4,179	4,049	5,200	6,462	1,935

Source: EdChoice, 2017 Survey of Florida Tax-Credit Scholarship Families (conducted July 5–August 17, 2017)

Q 32: Have you ever done any of the following things to support your child's K–12 education? Please check all that apply.

Usual Mode of Transportation to School

(By Race/Income)

	Overall	White	Black	Hispanic	Below \$24,600	\$24,600 to \$45,599	\$45,600 and Above
A family member drives them (including me)	80%	86%	73%	73%	76%	82%	86%
School bus	5%	3%	8%	8%	6%	4%	3%
Someone else drives them	4%	3%	6%	6%	5%	4%	3%
They drive themselves or carpool with a friend	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%
Walk	2%	1%	2%	2%	2%	1%	1%
Other public transportation	1%	<1%	2%	2%	2%	1%	<1%
Other Open-ended response	6%	4%	7%	7%	7%	6%	4%
Sample Size	14,752	4,553	4,179	4,049	5,200	6,462	1,935

Source: EdChoice, 2017 Survey of Florida Tax-Credit Scholarship Families (conducted July 5–August 17, 2017)

Q 34: How does your child get to school on most days?

NOTES

¹ EdChoice (2018), *The ABCs of School Choice: The Comprehensive Guide to Every Private School Choice Program in America*, 2018 Edition, p. 94, retrieved from <https://www.edchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/ABCs-of-School-Choice-2018-Edition-1.pdf>

² Florida Department of Education, Office of Independent Education and Parental Choice (2018), *Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program: June 2018 Quarterly Report*, retrieved from <http://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/7558/urlt/FTC-June-2018-Q-Report.pdf>

³ Zahid Kisa, Melissa Dyehouse, Toby Park, Brian Andrews-Larson, and Carolyn Herrington (2018), *Evaluation of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program: Participation, Compliance and Test Scores*, pp. v–vi, retrieved from the Florida Department of Education website: <http://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/5606/urlt/FTC-Report1617.pdf>

⁴ Matthew Chingos and Daniel Kuehn (2017), *The Effects of Statewide Private School Choice on College Enrollment and Graduation*, retrieved from Urban Institute website: <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/effects-statewide-private-school-choice-college-enrollment-and-graduation>

⁵ Cassandra M.D. Hart and David Figlio (2011), Does Competition Improve Public Schools?, *Education Next*, 11(1), p. 80, <https://www.educationnext.org/does-competition-improve-public-schools>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ In 2008–2009, the forgone revenue from the tax credits was \$82.2 million but the reduction in expenditures was \$118.4 million for a net savings of \$36.2 million. For every \$1 in forgone revenue, there was \$1.44 in reduced expenditures. Gary R. VanLandingham (2010), *Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program Fiscal Year 2008-09 Fiscal Impact* (The Florida Legislature: Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability), retrieved from http://www.opppa.state.fl.us/MonitorDocs/Reports/pdf/0868_1rpt.pdf

⁸ Martin F. Lueken (2016), *The Tax Credit Scholarship Audit*, retrieved from EdChoice website: <https://www.edchoice.org/research/tax-credit-scholarship-audit>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Constitution of the State of Florida, Article IX, Section 1.

¹¹ Constitution of the State of Florida, Article I, Section 3. For a discussion of the anti-Catholic origins of the Blaine Amendment, see: *School Choice: Blaine Amendments & Anti-Catholicism*, hearing before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (2007), retrieved from: <https://www.usccr.gov/pubs/docs/BlaineReport.pdf>

¹² Brandon Larrabee (2017, January 18), Florida Supreme Court turns down challenge to tax credit scholarships [Blog post], *Orlando Weekly*, retrieved from <https://www.orlandoweekly.com/Blogs/archives/2017/01/18/florida-supreme-court-turns-down-challenge-to-tax-credit-scholarships>

¹³ *Joanne McCall et al. v. Gov. Rick Scott et al.*, 1D15-2752 (Court of Appeals First District, State of Florida, 2016) retrieved from: https://edca.idca.org/DCADocs/2015/2752/152752_DC05_08162016_091719_i.pdf

¹⁴ Jessica Bakeman (2016, January 19), Tax-credit scholarship advocates target FEA in massive rally, *Politico*, retrieved from <https://www.politico.com/states/florida/story/2016/01/tax-credit-scholarship-advocates-target-fea-in-massive-rally-033344>; Allison Nielsen (2016, January 18), 10,000 School Choice Supporters to “Rally in Tally,” *Sunshine State News*, retrieved from <http://sunshinestatenews.com/story/10000-school-choice-supporters-rally-tally>

¹⁵ Gary Fineout (2016, January 19) Thousands ask union to end lawsuit against voucher program, *The Gainesville Sun*, para. 5, retrieved from <https://www.gainesville.com/news/20160119/thousands-ask-union-to-end-lawsuit-against-voucher-program>

¹⁶ Andrew D. Catt and Evan Rhinesmith (2017), *Why Indiana Parents Choose: A Cross-Sector Survey of Parents’ Views in a Robust School Choice Environment*, pp. 9–11, retrieved from EdChoice website: <https://www.edchoice.org/research/indiana-parents-choose>; Evan Rhinesmith (2017), A review of the research on parent satisfaction in private school choice programs, *Journal of School Choice*, 11(4), pp. 585–603, retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15582159.2017.1395639>

¹⁷ Catt and Rhinesmith (2017), *Why Indiana Parents Choose*, p. 6

¹⁸ EdChoice (2018), *The ABCs of School Choice*, p. 94.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Step Up for Students, Basic Program Facts about the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship (FTC) [web page], retrieved from <https://www.stepupforstudents.org/newsroom/basic-program-facts>

²¹ Ibid.

²² EdChoice (2018), *The ABCs of School Choice*, p. 94.

²³ The remainder of the scholarships are provided by AAA Scholarship Foundation.

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²⁵ United States Census Bureau, Quick Facts: Florida [web page], last modified July 2017, retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/FL>

²⁶ Step Up for Students, Basic Program Facts

²⁷ Florida Department of Education, Data Systems, PK-12 Education Information Services, PK-12 Public School Data Publications and Reports, Students [web page], accessed September 13, 2018, retrieved from <http://www.fldoe.org/accountability/data-sys/edu-info-accountability-services/pk-12-public-school-data-pubs-reports/students.stml>

²⁸ It is unclear why 47 respondents reported that they withdrew from the scholarship program but kept their child in the same private school. Step Up for Students said that they are unaware of “any instances in which this has occurred with our program.” It is possible that the respondents may have been confused.

²⁹ Among the two in ten who experienced some difficulties, respondents primarily expressed frustration with the application process, including difficulty providing documents needed for application (11%), the length of the application (5%), application deadlines (4%), and confusion about the application (2%). Additionally, 4 percent lacked access to a computer, 2 percent had difficulty understanding eligibility, and 1 percent cited language barriers.

³⁰ Previously, the program allowed up to 25 percent of the scholarship value to be used for transportation to an eligible private school. A statutory change in 2008 removed this provision. Scholarships may still be used to attend public schools outside the district in which a student resides, as well as to public lab schools. Florida Administrative Code & Florida Administrative Register, Florida Chapter 2008-241, Council Substitute for House Bill No. 653, Section (6)(d)1, p. 3, retrieved from <http://laws.flrules.org/2008/241>

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Jason Bedrick is director of policy for EdChoice. Previously, he was a policy analyst with the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom. He also served as a legislator in the New Hampshire House of Representatives and was an education policy research fellow at the Josiah Bartlett Center for Public Policy.

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Dr. Lindsey M. Burke is director of the Center for Education Policy and Will Skillman Fellow in Education for The Heritage Foundation. Burke oversees The Heritage Foundation’s research and policy on issues pertaining to preschool, K–12, and higher education reform. In 2013, Burke was also named the Will Skillman Fellow in Education Policy, devoting her time and research to reducing federal intervention in education at all levels and empowering families with educational choice. She also currently serves as an EdChoice Fellow.

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The authors take responsibility for any errors, misrepresentations, or omissions in this publication.

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The authors welcomes any and all questions related to methods and findings.

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