WHY CATHOLIC SCHOOLS IN FLORIDA ARE GROWING:

5 THINGS TO KNOW

Florida Catholic Conference & Step Up For Students

Contents

Introduction

In 2009, the Archdiocese of Miami reluctantly closed St. Malachy Catholic School in the city of Tamarac, 15 miles from Fort Lauderdale. On the one hand, St. Malachy fell victim to the Great Recession. On the other, it was undermined by the same factors that have conspired to close thousands of Catholic schools over the past half century.

Thankfully, the story didn't end there. The economy improved. Young families began moving to the area. And Florida's pace-setting school choice programs became even stronger, with increased eligibility, more value per scholarship, and more state support.

Last fall, the Archdiocese re-opened St. Malachy.

That unlikely comeback alone would be inspiration enough against a national backdrop in which Catholic school enrollment continues to struggle. But in Florida, it's just one of many examples that illustrate the most encouraging trend lines for Catholic schools in America.

Nationally, Catholic school enrollment held steady in 2023-24, according to the latest annual report from the National Catholic Educational Association, released on March 20.

In Florida, enrollment climbed to 90,785. That's up 5.2 percent from the prior year – and more growth in one year than in the previous 10 years combined.

In light of the new data, we thought it appropriate to issue this brief update to the white paper we published last August.

"Why Catholic Schools In Florida Are Growing: 5 Things To Know" took a closer look at the Florida trend lines and some of the leading factors behind them.

At the time of publication, Florida was the only state in the Top 10 for Catholic school enrollment to experience growth over the past decade – a modest 4.4 percent. The latest NCEA figures show Florida remains the outlier. But this year's gains pushed the 10-year increase to 9.2 percent. See *Figure 1.*

Figure 1. Trends in states with 10 highest Catholic school enrollments

State	2013-14	2023-24	Change	%Change
California	212,918	186,199	-26,719	-12.5%
New York	180,728	124,638	-56,090	-31.0%
Ohio	133,501	119,285	-14,216	-10.6%
Illinois	147,003	113,361	-33,642	-22.9%
Pennsylvania	136,124	104,533	-31,591	-23.2%
Florida	83,159	90,785	7,626	9.2%
Louisiana	80,692	70,333	-10,359	-12.8%
Texas	78,433	64,501	-13,932	-17.8%
New Jersey	86,863	59,461	-27,402	-31.5%
Missouri	64,007	55,326	-8,681	-13.6%
Total U.S.	1,974,578	1,693,327	-281,251	-14.2%

Source: National Catholic Educational Association

Clearly, Florida's robust array of school choice programs are a difference maker. This year, nearly 400,000 students in the state are using choice scholarships. But it's also true that in the most competitive educational environment in the country, Florida Catholic schools have found even more ways to stand out to even more families.

They have become increasingly diverse along multiple dimensions, and more diversified in terms of high-quality academic programming. Some dioceses have also embraced – and relentlessly deployed – cutting-edge communications strategies to raise parental awareness about choice scholarships.

Our white paper touches on all of these parts of the story. This brief is intended as a supplement.

We updated a handful of key charts and graphs featured in the white paper, using new data from the NCEA and the Florida Catholic Conference. Among them: a year-by-year breakdown of Catholic school enrollment numbers, for the past decade, for all 50 states.

We also added a couple of new charts. One highlights the trend lines for students using special needs scholarships in Florida Catholic schools. The other does the same for non-Catholic students. Both are on the rise.

We are happy to address any questions or provide any additional information we can about the good news from Florida. Please see the bios at the end of this brief for our contact information.

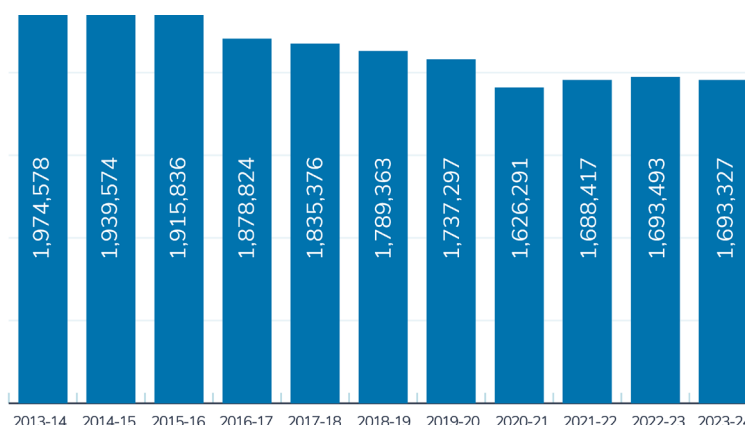*Students at St. Charles Borromeo Catholic School in Orlando*

Rising Enrollment

Following a COVID-fueled drop in 2020, Catholic schools rebounded nationally with two consecutive years of growth. This year, enrollment held steady. See *Figure 2*.

Catholic schools in Florida, meanwhile, had a banner year this year. *See Figure 3*.

The big reason: HB 1. The historic law passed by the Florida Legislature and signed by Gov. Ron DeSantis in March 2023 makes every student in Florida eligible for a state-supported education choice scholarship.

Figure 2. Nationwide Catholic school PreK-12 enrollment, 2013-14 to 2023-24.

2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
1,974,578	1,939,574	1,915,836	1,878,824	1,835,376	1,789,363	1,737,297	1,626,291	1,688,417	1,693,493	1,693,327

Source: National Catholic Educational Association

Figure 3. Florida Catholic school PreK-12 enrollment, 2013-14 to 2023-24.

2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
83,159	82,816	84,084	84,554	84,540	83,489	83,106	77,689	82,615	86,267	90,785
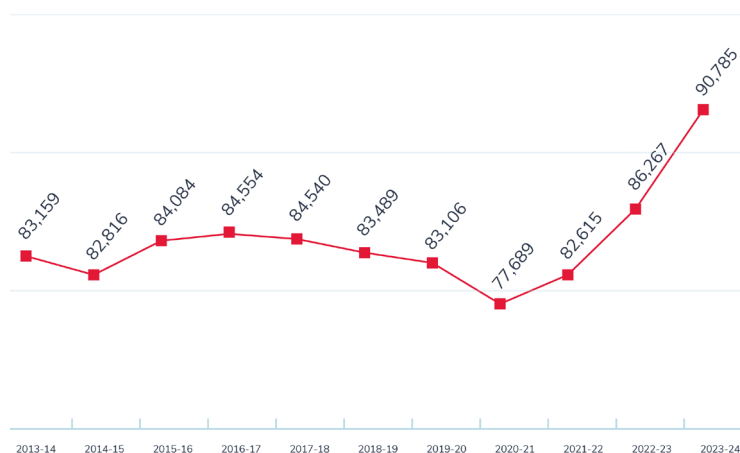
Source: National Catholic Educational Association

Increasing Choice

HB 1 led to a historic increase in the share of Florida Catholic school students who use choice scholarships, from 47 percent in 2022-23 to 75 percent in 2023-24. See Figure 4 for the change in scholarship share, and F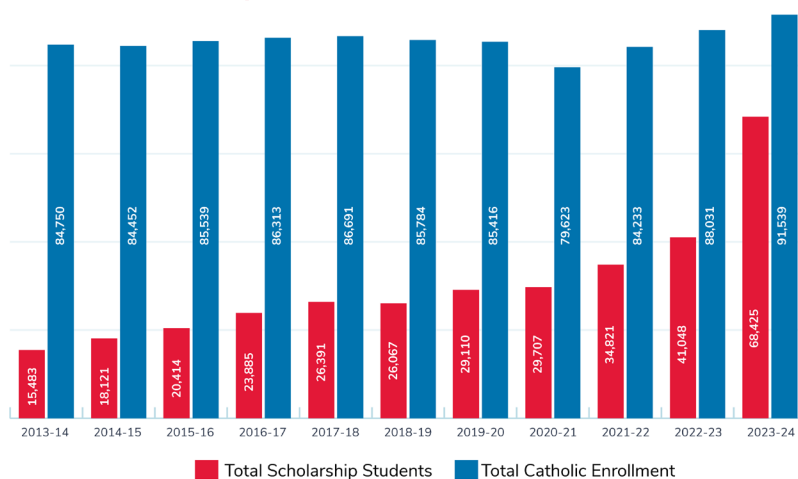igure 5 for a breakdown in scholarship type. Appendix B in the white paper offers a primer on Florida's different scholarships.

Figure 4. Share of choice scholarship students in Florida Catholic schools, 2013-14 to 2023-24.

Source: Florida Catholic Conference. Note: The total enrollment figures are slightly higher than the figures from the NCEA, because they include a broader group of PreK and preschool students. The scholarship totals here also include Florida's state-funded vouchers for PreK students.

Figure 5. Enrollment in Florida Catholic schools by scholarship type, 2013-14 to 2023-24.
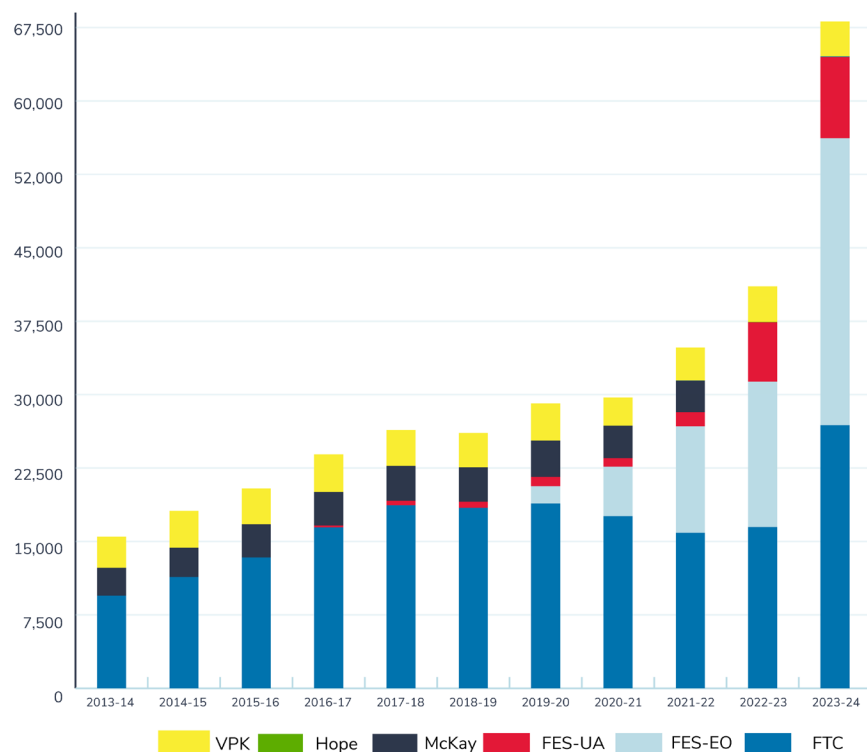
Source: Florida Catholic Conference

Growing Diversity

As our white paper noted, students in Florida Catholic schools have become increasingly diverse, including with overall race and ethnicity. *See Figure 6.*

This year, Florida Catholic schools also saw 37 percent growth in students who use special needs scholarships. *See Figure 7.* That program continues to be especially popular with parents, and Florida lawmakers have proposed additional capacity so it can serve every family who wants it.

Figure 6. Minority student share in Florida Catholic schools, 2013-14 to 2023-24.
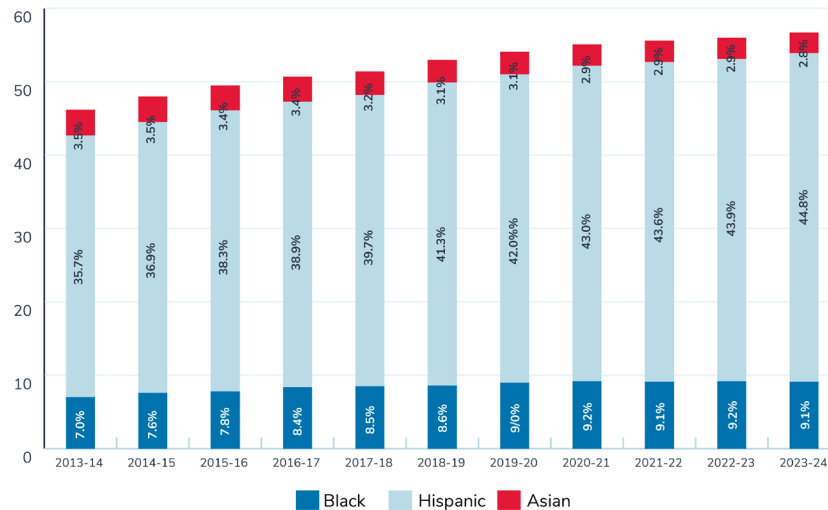
Source: Florida Catholic Conference

Figure 7. Special needs scholarship students in Florida Catholic schools, 2013-14 to 2023-24.
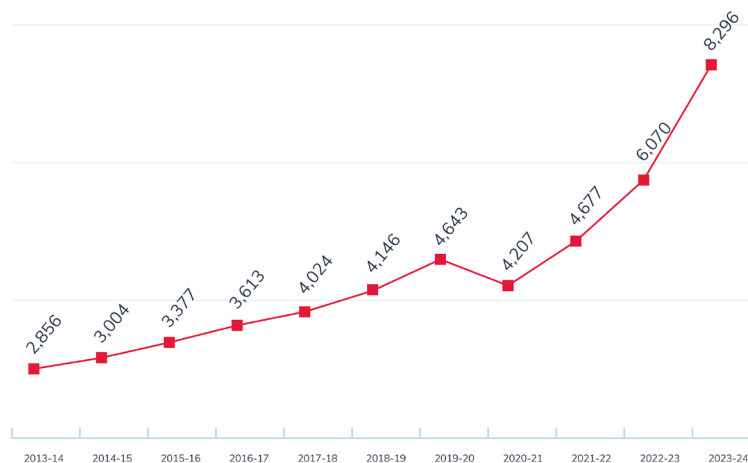
Source: Florida Catholic Conference

Growing Diversity (continued)

Florida Catholic schools are also seeing a steady increase in students who are not Catholic. This year, the number of non-Catholic students in Florida Catholic schools rose from 16,914 to 17,616, a 4.2 percent increase. The overall share remained the same. *See Figure 8.*

Figure 8. Percentage of non-Catholic students in Florida Catholic schools, 2013-14 to 2023-24.

2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24
13.9%	14.3%	14.4%	15.7%	16.8%	16.5%	17.5%	17.4%	18.1%	19.2%	19.2%

Source: Florida Catholic Conference

Discussion

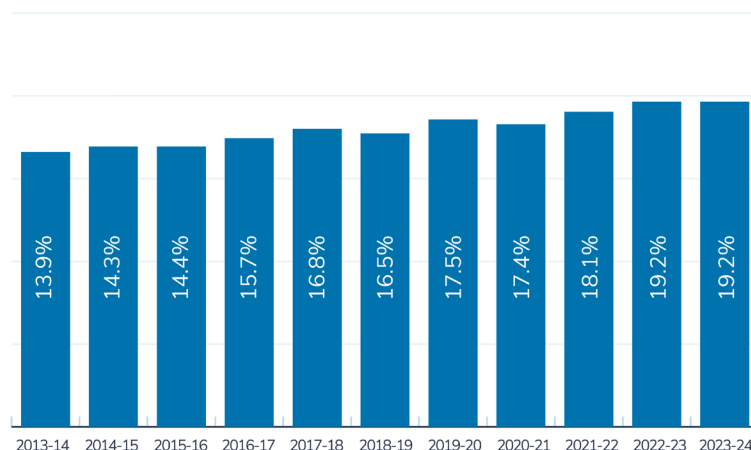Private school choice in Florida celebrates its 25th anniversary this year. Its expansion has given families from all walks of life access to schools that weren't available a generation ago - and helped bring historic progress to Florida's education system.

Catholic schools have been a strong part of Florida's success. Now, with education choice finally gaining traction across America, supporters of Catholic education have an unprecedented opportunity to bolster Catholic schools in their states.

Families have endless reasons for wanting options. Writing for The 74 last October, parent Alicia Giordano detailed that her family moved from Texas to Florida in part to access the choice programs that Florida has and Texas doesn't. Her children have learning and medical challenges, and she determined a Catholic school would be best for them.

The Catholic Church also emphasizes the importance of choice. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches, "Parents have the right to choose a school for them which corresponds to their own personal convictions. This right is fundamental." It also says "public authorities have the duty of guaranteeing this parental right and ensuring concrete conditions for its exercise."

We hope the story of Florida's Catholic schools can offer lessons to Catholic educators elsewhere. There's no reason Florida should remain the outlier.

Appendix A: Catholic School PreK-12 Enrollment Trends by State

State	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Change	% Change
Catholic School Enrollment by State 2013-14 through 2023-24													
Alabama	12,290	12,605	12,230	11,905	11,533	10,992	10,602	9,353	9,831	9,546	9,735	-2,555	-20.8%
Alaska	951	935	906	958	1,001	992	942	689	909	869	847	-104	-10.9%
Arizona	20,387	19,868	20,282	20,604	20,693	20,647	20,429	20,322	20,761	20,817	21,346	959	4.7%
Arkansas	6,790	6,889	6,776	6,799	6,706	6,643	6,498	6,143	6,293	6,428	6,599	-191	-2.8%
California	212,918	210,788	210,971	207,925	204,239	199,529	196,117	177,331	186,473	187,101	186,199	-26,719	-12.5%
Colorado	15,682	15,226	15,103	15,100	15,038	15,033	14,746	15,205	15,989	15,979	16,165	483	3.1%
Connecticut	30,508	29,174	27,949	26,838	25,391	23,861	22,030	20,134	20,546	20,648	20,723	-9,785	-32.1%
Delaware	10,750	10,418	10,391	10,092	9,805	9,685	9,420	8,520	8,675	8,885	9,004	-1,746	-16.2%
Florida	83,159	82,816	84,084	84,554	84,540	83,489	83,106	77,689	82,615	86,267	90,785	7,626	9.2%
Georgia	16,685	16,546	16,537	16,608	16,348	16,096	15,445	15,260	15,581	15,578	15,664	-1,021	-6.1%
Hawaii	9,110	9,163	8,923	8,911	8,604	8,119	7,503	6,726	7,014	6,640	6,236	-2,874	-31.5%
Idaho	3,073	3,171	3,175	3,290	3,499	3,590	3,709	3,715	4,057	4,048	3,984	911	29.6%
Illinois	147,003	144,167	140,285	135,456	130,123	126,814	122,286	112,258	116,182	114,936	113,361	-33,642	-22.9%
Indiana	56,331	56,605	55,908	55,623	55,212	54,317	52,325	48,586	50,884	52,628	52,844	-3,487	-6.2%
Iowa	28,650	28,926	29,270	28,964	28,704	28,269	27,764	26,565	27,187	26,868	28,680	30	0.1%
Kansas	28,916	28,629	28,365	28,280	27,974	27,469	27,262	25,753	26,540	26,674	26,666	-2,250	-7.8%
Kentucky	37,237	36,710	36,362	36,424	36,277	35,332	34,745	33,343	34,815	34,764	35,275	-1,962	-5.3%
Louisiana	80,692	79,745	78,540	76,945	75,238	73,812	72,215	69,176	69,559	70,317	70,333	-10,359	-12.8%
Maine	3,016	2,965	2,858	2,653	2,533	2,347	1,587	2,104	2,288	2,273	1,944	-1,072	-35.5%
Maryland	26,160	25,633	25,287	25,105	24,727	23,861	23,643	23,400	24,297	24,727	24,744	-1,416	-5.4%
Massachusetts	58,508	57,057	56,331	53,800	51,402	48,899	46,786	43,236	46,235	46,116	45,547	-12,961	-22.2%
Michigan	55,530	53,994	53,681	53,027	51,297	50,257	48,246	46,332	49,215	50,386	49,812	-5,718	-10.3%
Minnesota	46,463	44,771	43,554	43,082	42,914	42,642	41,774	41,526	44,830	45,342	44,870	-1,593	-3.4%
Mississippi	8,219	7,922	7,723	7,693	7,675	7,476	7,391	6,947	7,584	7,521	7,331	-888	-10.8%
Missouri	64,007	62,520	61,379	59,838	58,403	57,574	56,486	53,971	55,612	55,780	55,326	-8,681	-13.6%
Montana	3,727	3,900	3,880	3,886	3,791	3,830	3,845	3,588	3,743	3,848	3,542	-185	-5.0%
Nebraska	28,323	27,898	28,868	29,219	29,057	28,847	28,391	26,745	27,100	27,118	26,935	-1,388	-4.9%
Nevada	5,658	5,645	5,665	5,590	5,462	5,322	5,165	5,392	5,498	5,585	5,561	-97	-1.7%
New Hampshire	6,472	6,104	5,804	5,617	5,363	5,415	5,185	5,304	5,649	5,678	5,707	-765	-11.8%
New Jersey	86,863	82,978	80,303	76,578	72,957	69,392	65,497	58,653	60,923	59,645	59,461	-27,402	-31.5%
New Mexico	6,496	6,284	6,239	5,877	5,811	5,653	5,447	4,978	5,129	4,516	4,936	-1,560	-24.0%
New York	180,728	175,677	170,717	165,651	159,447	153,606	145,858	132,822	133,887	129,893	124,638	-56,090	-31.0%
North Carolina	16,440	16,621	16,504	16,361	16,089	16,051	16,000	15,686	16,849	17,451	17,730	1,290	7.8%
North Dakota	4,743	4,647	4,722	4,813	4,802	4,960	4,980	4,997	5,277	5,203	5,560	817	17.2%
Ohio	133,501	131,139	129,349	127,176	125,688	123,749	121,315	116,654	118,859	118,861	119,285	-14,216	-10.6%
Oklahoma	9,567	9,599	9,627	9,579	9,515	9,710	9,575	8,925	9,051	9,160	9,309	-258	-2.7%
Oregon	15,421	15,521	15,447	15,201	15,262	15,249	15,136	14,322	15,606	15,513	15,325	-96	-0.6%
Pennsylvania	136,124	132,726	131,018	126,771	122,569	117,290	111,835	103,464	105,432	104,108	104,533	-31,591	-23.2%
Rhode Island	13,100	12,671	11,767	11,428	10,825	10,367	9,918	9,192	9,637	9,612	9,731	-3,369	-25.7%
South Carolina	6,988	7,085	7,206	7,273	7,164	7,042	6,908	6,981	7,157	7,523	7,588	600	8.6%
South Dakota	5,896	5,880	5,814	5,545	5,729	5,649	5,579	5,328	5,449	5,386	5,500	-396	-6.7%
Tennessee	17,372	16,859	16,728	16,384	16,196	15,519	13,844	12,658	13,897	14,435	14,204	-3,168	-18.2%
Texas	78,433	78,070	77,188	74,967	71,887	70,022	67,348	60,626	62,256	64,243	64,501	-13,932	-17.8%
Utah	5,454	5,327	5,441	5,231	5,209	5,016	4,757	4,362	4,757	4,848	4,755	-699	-12.8%
Vermont	2,090	2,040	1,997	1,979	1,944	1,951	1,908	1,835	2,006	1,972	2,079	-11	-0.5%
Virginia	26,765	26,456	26,556	26,541	26,290	25,947	25,518	25,061	27,269	27,717	27,802	1,037	3.9%
Washington	28,517	28,042	28,145	28,049	27,677	25,795	26,748	25,221	26,989	27,029	27,290	-1,227	-4.3%
Washington D.C.	27,302	26,960	26,822	26,856	26,254	26,171	25,693	24,374	25,557	26,074	26,168	-1,134	-4.2%
West Virginia	5,690	5,640	5,667	5,448	5,112	4,965	4,627	4,045	4,259	4,422	4,564	-1,126	-19.8%
Wisconsin	58,893	57,559	56,518	55,411	54,427	53,090	52,226	50,054	51,497	51,723	51,820	-7,073	-12.0%
Wyoming	980	1,003	974	919	973	1,010	937	740	712	792	783	-197	-20.1%
United States	1,974,578	1,939,574	1,915,836	1,878,824	1,835,376	1,789,363	1,737,297	1,626,291	1,688,417	1,693,493	1,693,327	-281,251	-14.2%

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About the organizations

The Florida Catholic Conference and the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops are the two corporations of the Catholic bishops of Florida. The Conference is the nonpartisan voice of the bishops that carries out policy and advocacy activities. It also accredits and ensures the continual improvement of Catholic schools and coordinates disaster relief efforts with Catholic Charities agencies across Florida.

Step Up For Students is a nonprofit that administers four education choice scholarship programs in Florida: the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, the Family Empowerment Scholarship, the Hope Scholarship, and the New Worlds Scholarship Accounts.