

DENISHA ALLEN | RON MATUS | MARCH 2025

# CONTROLLING THE NARRATIVE

## 2025 UPDATE BRIEF

PARENTAL CHOICE, BLACK EMPOWERMENT &  
LESSONS FROM FLORIDA

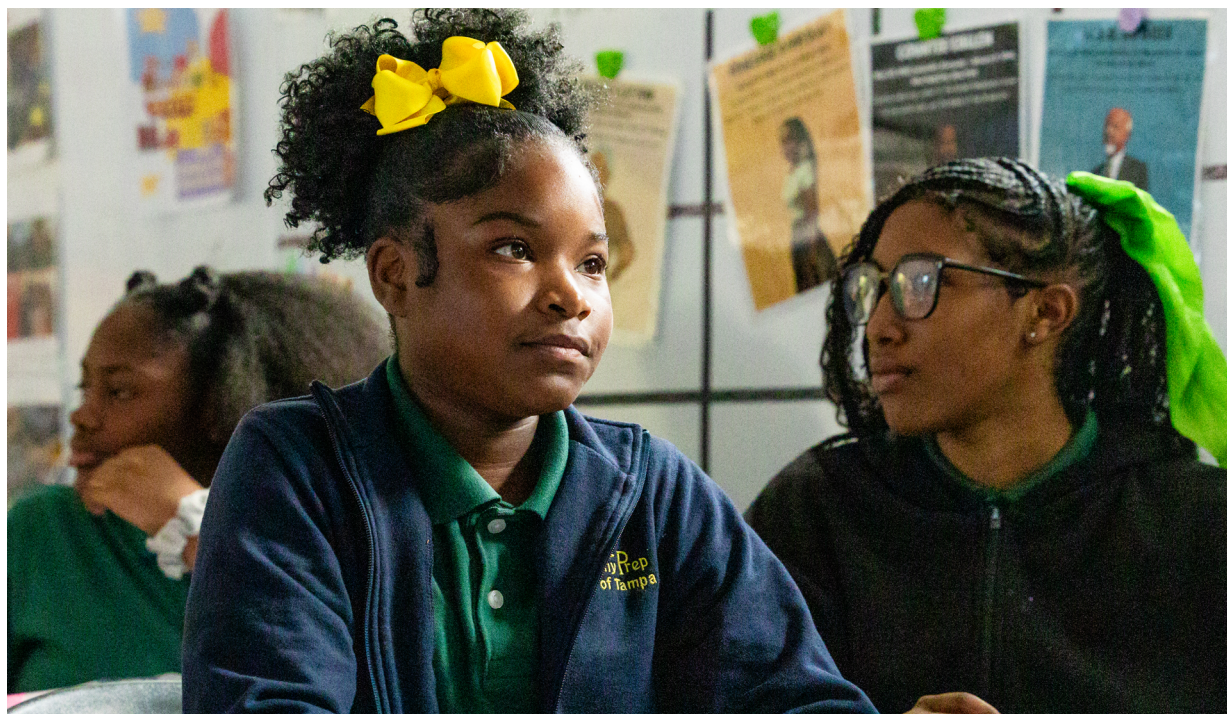


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# TAKEAWAYS

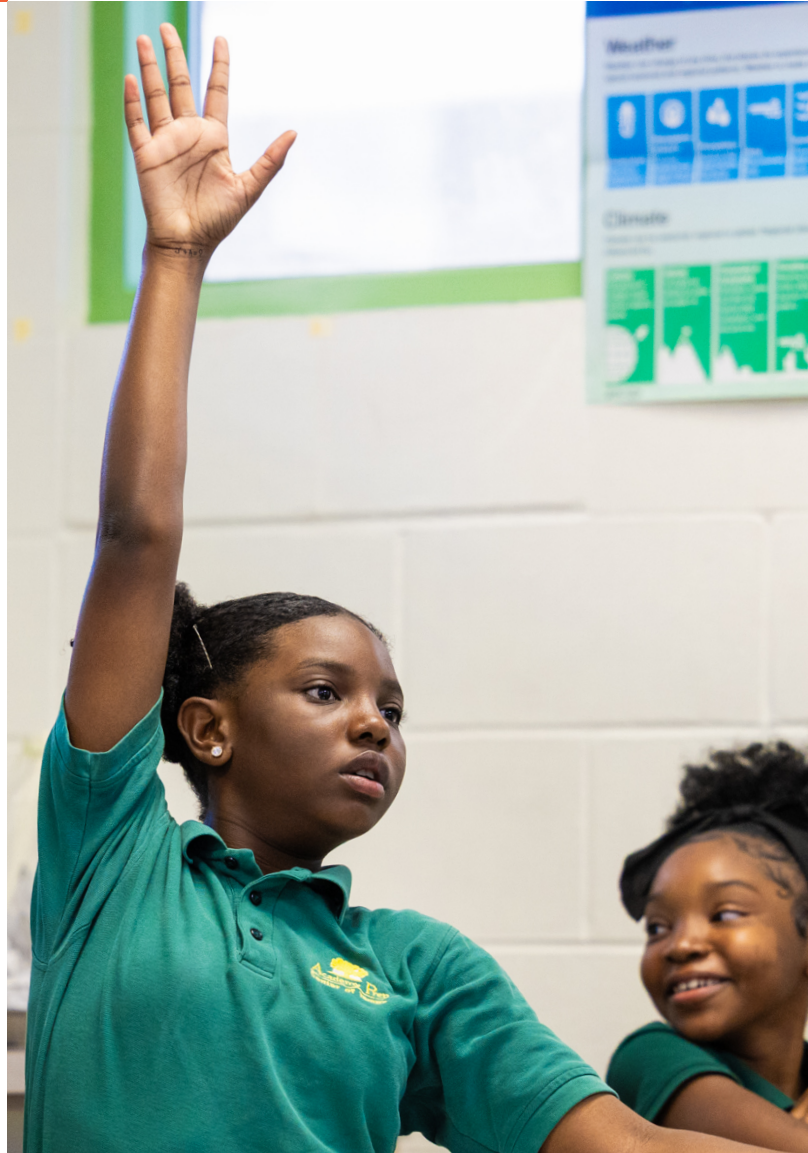
*Black students in Florida charter schools continue to outperform their counterparts in district schools.*

Growing numbers of Black families in Florida, the most school-choice-rich state in America, continue to embrace school choice options beyond district schools.

In 2023-24, the first year of “universal choice” in Florida, 142,384 Black students were enrolled in state-supported choice options beyond district schools. That’s more than 1 in 5 Black students in the state.

The most recent achievement data, while limited for comparison purposes, shows Black students in Florida charter schools continue to outperform their counterparts in district schools.

Meanwhile, Black public school students in Florida continue to rank in the top five in fourth-grade reading and math, relative to Black students in other states, and in the middle of the pack in eighth-grade reading and math, after trailing their peers in most states on those key measures in the 1990s.



# INTRODUCTION

*If choice is a plot to help wealthy, white families, as opponents insist, Black families didn't get the memo.*

Ben Crump, often referred to as Black America's Attorney General, could send his child to any school he wanted to. So, it says everything that he and his wife chose a small private school in an unassuming Black neighborhood.

Brownsville Preparatory Institute is known in Tallahassee as the place where three year olds learn to read. Crump calls it "excellence personified." In an audio recording on the school's website, he encourages other parents to "send your brown, Black, and beautiful little children to Black excellence."<sup>1</sup>

Using state choice scholarships, scores of Black families are doing just that. And thanks to Florida's rich array of choice options, the families of more than 140,000 other Black students are accessing options beyond district schools, whether charter schools, private schools, microschools or home education with the help of education savings accounts.

In 2021, we published "Controlling the Narrative: Parental Choice, Black Empowerment, and Lessons from Florida."<sup>2</sup> The report put a spotlight on the growing numbers of Black students using K-12 scholarship programs in the most choice-rich state in America, as well as their rising academic outcomes.

We're issuing this update brief because -

- 1) the numbers continue to grow, and
- 2) the context for that growth has shifted dramatically.

In the past three years, the number of states with universal education choice programs jumped from zero to twelve. This rapid expansion of choice will bring life-changing opportunities to students, parents, educators, entrepreneurs, and communities of all kinds, including Black communities.

The Sunshine State offers a glimpse of what's ahead.

In Florida, nearly 70,000 Black students received K-12 scholarships in 2023-24. That's two and a half times the number from a decade ago and up 45 percent since our initial report.

If choice is a plot to help wealthy, white families, as opponents insist, Black families didn't get the memo.



1. <https://nextstepsblog.org/2024/06/excellence-personified-the-school-where-3-year-olds-learn-to-read/>

2. <https://nextstepsblog.org/2021/12/controlling-the-narrative-parental-choice-black-empowerment-and-lessons-from-florida/>



# DEMAND



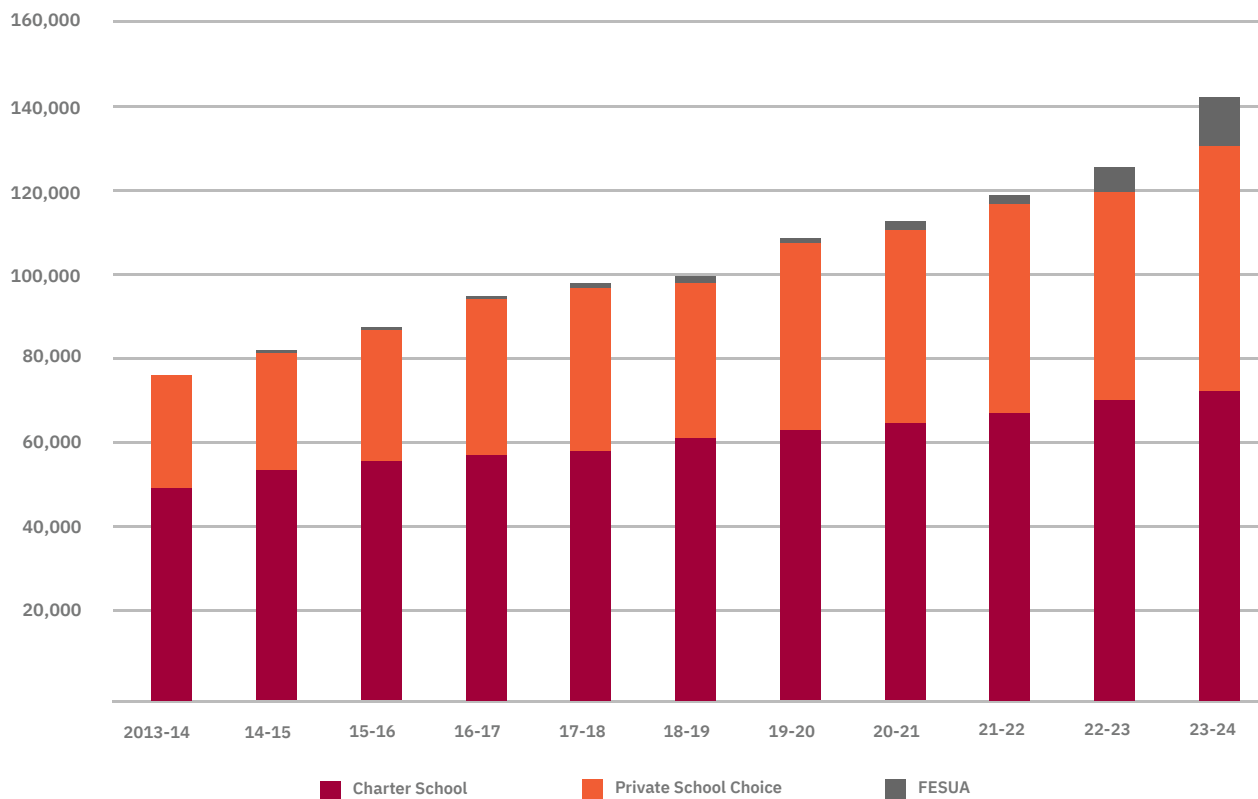
Black families in Florida continue to gravitate to options beyond traditional public schools.

In 2023-24, 142,384 Black students in Florida accessed charter schools, private schools or microschools via school choice scholarships, or education savings accounts for students with special needs. **See Figure 1.**

That's up from 112,662 in 2020-21, the last year observed in our initial report, and up from 76,547 a decade ago.

For context, 31 states have fewer Black students in their public schools than Florida has in these choice options.<sup>3</sup>

**FIGURE 1. BLACK STUDENTS IN FLORIDA NON-DISTRICT CHOICE OPTIONS**



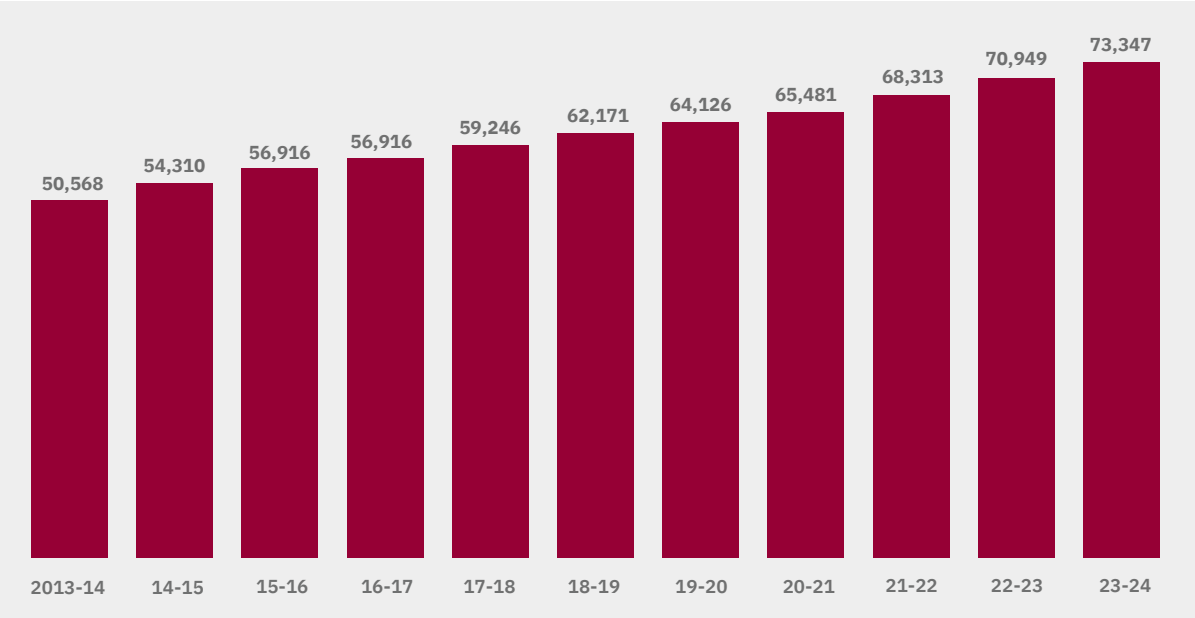
Source: Florida Department of Education and Step Up For Students. The scholarship numbers do not include a small number of scholarships administered by another scholarship funding organization.

3. [Public school students overall and by race/ethnicity, students with disabilities served under IDEA and those served solely under Section 504, and students who are English language learners, by state: School Year 2017-18](#)

Proportionally, the percentage of Black students now enrolled in state-supported, non-district options is more than 1 in 5, up from about 1 in 6 three years ago. (It’s not possible to calculate an exact percentage because we do not have racial breakdowns for the private school and homeschool sectors in Florida.)

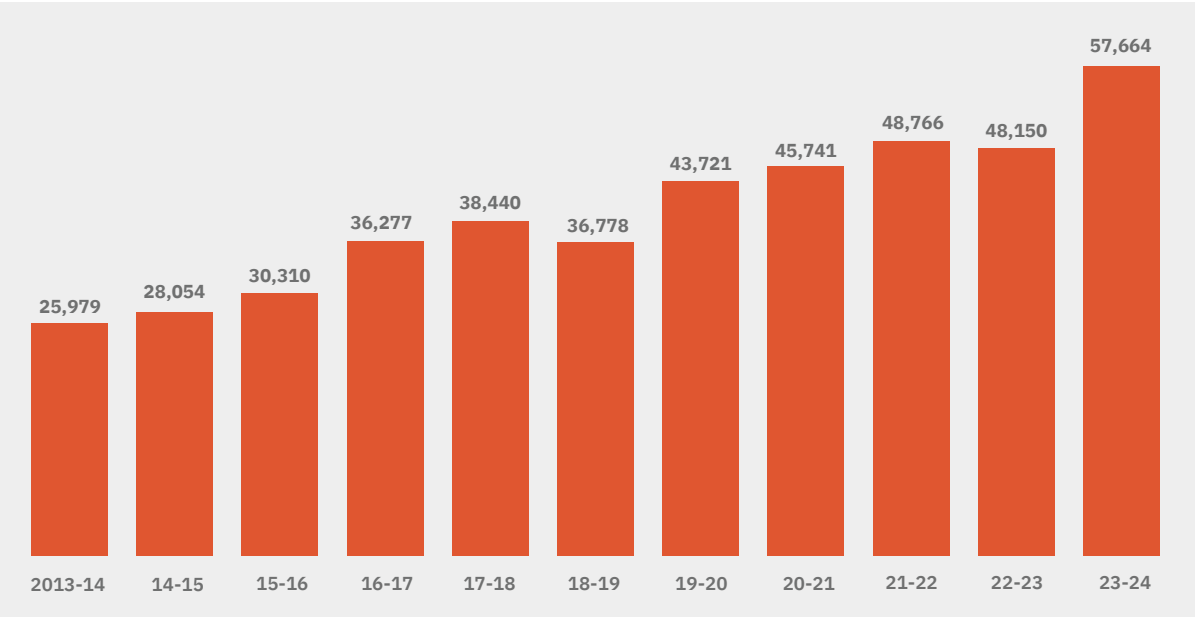
Black student participation is growing across all choice programs where data is available. The following charts show the trend lines for charter schools, private school choice scholarships, and education savings accounts for students with special needs. **See Figure 2, Figure 3, Figure 4.**

**FIGURE 2. BLACK STUDENT ENROLLMENT IN FLORIDA CHARTER SCHOOLS**



Source: Florida Department of Education

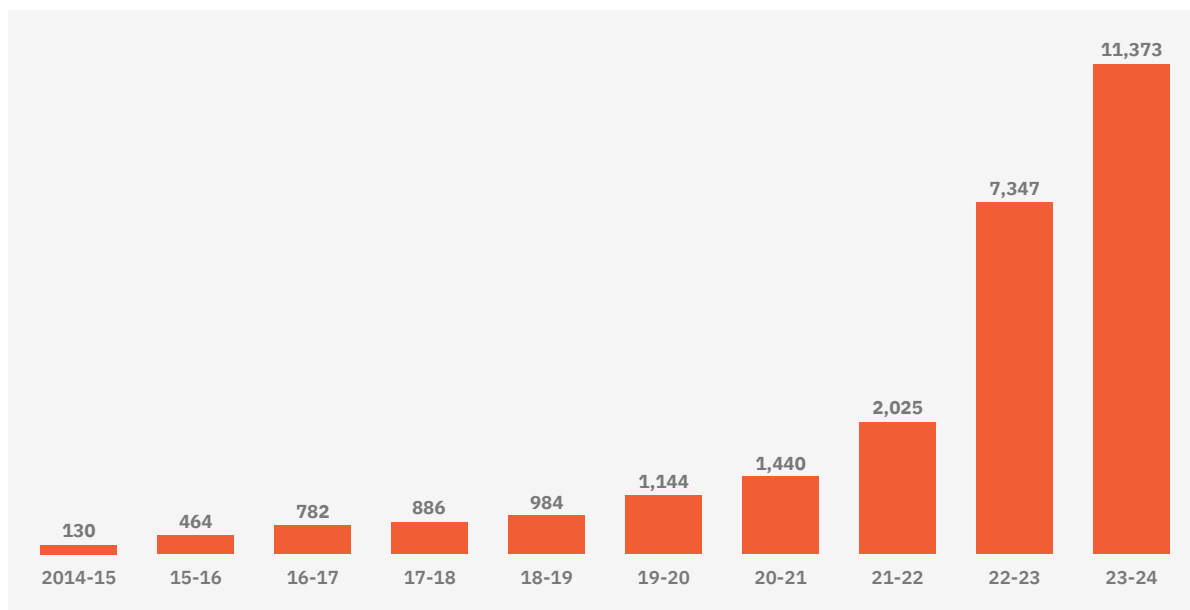
**FIGURE 3. BLACK STUDENTS USING FLORIDA’S PRIVATE SCHOOL CHOICE SCHOLARSHIPS**



Source: Florida Department of Education and Step Up For Students. Includes the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Educational Options, and the McKay Scholarship, which was merged into the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Students with Unique Abilities in 2022-23. FES-EO counts don't include a small number of scholarships administered by another scholarship funding organization.



**FIGURE 4. BLACK STUDENTS USING FLORIDA ESA FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS**



Source: Step Up For Students. The program that became the FES-UA scholarship began in 2014. The numbers here do not include a small number of scholarships administered by another scholarship funding organization.

## A PRIMER ON FLORIDA'S MAIN EDUCATION CHOICE SCHOLARSHIPS

The primary choice scholarships in Florida are now education savings accounts,<sup>4</sup> but the programs have different degrees of funding and flexibility. Here is a brief summary of the main programs.

**Scholarships for Educational Options.** Under this category, there are two scholarships: The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship (FTC) and the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Educational Options (FES-EO). The former is funded by corporate contributions in return for dollar-for-dollar tax credits; the latter, by the state. Both are worth about \$8,000 per year. Both can be used for some programs and services beyond tuition, such as tutors, curriculum, and instructional materials. Only a small percentage of FTC and FES-EO families have funds remaining after tuition.

**Scholarships for Students with Unique Abilities.** Florida created an ESA for students with special needs in 2014. It's now called the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Students with Unique Abilities (FES-UA). It's worth about \$10,000 per year – and it is Florida's most flexible ESA. It can be used for a wide range of programs and services, including tuition, tutors, therapists, curriculum, instructional materials, digital devices, and specialized after-school and summer school programs.

**Personalized Education Program.** The Personalized Education Program, or PEP, is available to students not enrolled in full-time public or private schools. It was available to 20,000 students in 2023-24 and will be available for up to 40,000 additional students each subsequent year through 2027, after which the cap will be removed. PEP scholarships are valued the same as FTC and FES-EO scholarships and can be used for the same expenses.<sup>5</sup>

4. HB 1, the historic bill signed into law by Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis in 2023, made every student in Florida eligible for education choice scholarships, and converted the scholarships into ESAs.

5. According to preliminary Step Up For Students data, 1,590 of the 18,935 students awarded PEP scholarships in 2023-24 were Black. The data does not include a small number of scholarships awarded by another scholarship funding organization.

# SPOTLIGHT:

Rita Brown | Brownsville  
Preparatory Institute



Rita Brown says the only advertisement she needs for her school is the students she serves. “The other parents hear them talk – and they know,” she said. “They know something is happening here that isn’t happening in other places.” The retired businesswoman and former homeschool mom began her journey in education entrepreneurship 20 years ago, running a learning pod in her Tallahassee home for six preschool-age children. Now Brownsville Preparatory Institute serves 80 students in PreK-3, with 200-plus on a waiting list. The emphasis is on early literacy, core academics, and Black history and culture.

See more of Rita Brown’s story [here](#).

## OUTCOMES | Choice Schools

Data comparing the academic performance of Black students in Florida private schools and charter schools to their peers in district schools is limited. Outcomes fell following the COVID-19 pandemic but continue to show an advantage for Black students in choice schools.

### PRIVATE SCHOOLS

For students using Florida school choice scholarships, the best available comparative data can be gleaned from -

- 1) annual test score analyses conducted by state-hired researchers since 2006-07;<sup>6</sup> and
- 2) a 2019 Urban Institute report that analyzed longer-term academic outcomes.<sup>7</sup>

Both focused on the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, which has long been one of the largest private school choice programs in America. Neither specifically compared Black students across sectors. Until 2023-24, FTC eligibility was limited by income; historically, about 75 percent of its recipients have been students of color.<sup>8</sup>

The most recent test score analysis, published in December 2024 and based on 2022-23 results, continued to show two consistent trends: 1) students on scholarship were, on average, the lowest performing students in their prior public schools, and 2) they are now making the same average annual learning gains as students of all income levels nationally.

The Urban Institute, meanwhile, found FTC students were up to 43 percent more likely than their public school peers to attend four-year colleges and up to 20 percent more likely to earn bachelor’s degrees.

6. <https://www.fldoe.org/schools/school-choice/facts-figures.stml>

7. <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/effects-florida-tax-credit-scholarship-program-college-enrollment-and-graduation>

8. According to the most recent Florida Tax Credit Scholarship quarterly report, from June 2023, 72.8 percent of FTC students are students of color, and 28.0 percent are Black. <https://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/7558/urlt/FTC-Jun-2023-Q-Report.pdf>



# CHARTER SCHOOLS

For Black students attending Florida charter schools, one point of comparison to district schools is the annual achievement reports compiled by the Florida Department of Education.<sup>9</sup>

The most recent report (2022) found Black students in charter schools outperformed Black students in district schools in 31 of 38 categories on state standardized tests. However, as noted in our 2021 report, Black students in Florida charter schools are less likely to be low-income or to be designated as having special needs. The state analyses don't adjust for those differences.

More recent results are not available since the state switched to a new standardized test in 2023.

A more apples-to-apples comparison can be found with the performance of low-income Black students in Florida charter schools and district schools on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

As we noted in 2021, low-income Black students in Florida charter schools significantly outperformed their counterparts in Florida district schools on the 2019 NAEP.

The results on the most recent NAEP – administered in 2024 and released in January 2025 – also show better outcomes for low-income Black students in Florida charter schools. **See Figure 5.**

**FIGURE 5. 2024 NAEP PERFORMANCE, LOW-INCOME BLACK STUDENTS IN FLORIDA CHARTER SCHOOLS & DISTRICT SCHOOLS**

Test	Avg. Scale Scores		% at Basic & Above		% at Proficient & Above	
	Charter	District	Charter	District	Charter	District
Grade 4 Reading	215	199	64%	44%	18%	16%
Grade 4 Math	237	223	80%	64%	32%	18%
Grade 8 Reading	246	235	58%	42%	15%	11%
Grade 8 Math	250	245	36%	29%	5%	5%

Yellow highlight indicates difference is statistically significant

However, the results also show declines for both charter and district school students in the wake of the pandemic<sup>10</sup>, part of a larger pattern that hit students of color particularly hard. <sup>11</sup>

Subgroup outcomes on NAEP can be volatile given smaller numbers of tested students,<sup>12</sup> so it's more valuable to keep tabs on longer-term trend lines.

9. <https://www.fldoe.org/schools/school-choice/charter-schools/charter-school-program-reports/student-achievement-reports.stm>  
10. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/two-decades-of-progress-nearly-gone-national-math-reading-scores-hit-historic-lows/2022/10>  
11. <https://nextstepsblog.org/2022/09/naep-reveals-students-starting-with-the-least-suffered-the-most-in-covid-19-shutdowns/>  
12. <https://nextstepsblog.org/2023/12/opinion-why-naep-scores-should-be-used-with-skepticism-when-ranking-states-charter-schools/>

# SPOTLIGHT:

LaTania Scott and Kameeka Shirley  
| Blazing Stars Montessori School



Teachers of color are a distinctive force among the growing numbers of former public teachers creating new schools and other learning options in Florida. LaTania Scott and Kameeka Shirley co-founded Blazing Stars Montessori School in semi-rural Dade City. It is affiliated with Wildflower Schools, a network of teacher-led Montessori microschools, and the Black Wildflowers Fund, a sister organization that supports Black teacher leaders. Scott is an 18-year public school veteran. Shirley is a Teach for America alumna. They wanted the power to run a school their way, rather than being constrained by somebody else’s agenda. Their school is diverse along multiple dimensions and aims to be, in Shirley’s words, “a path to peace.”

More on Blazing Stars [here](#).

## OUTCOMES | Public Schools

### TEST SCORES

In the late 1990s, Florida scored near the bottom nationally on all four of the core NAEP tests in math and reading, once adjusted for demographics. By 2022, it had risen to No. 1, No. 1, No. 5, and No. 7, respectively. (The tests are fourth-grade reading, fourth-grade math, eighth-grade reading, and eighth-grade math.)

On the 2024 NAEP, Florida’s scores and rankings took a dip, dropping to No. 2, No. 3, No. 22, and No. 22, according to the adjusted results.<sup>13</sup>

It’s not clear what factors may be responsible, <sup>14</sup> but the trend lines for Black students in Florida have generally followed the same pattern.

In the 1990s, they ranked near the bottom compared to Black students in other states. In 2022, they ranked No. 2, No. 2, No. 4, and No. 6. In 2024, they ranked No. 2, No. 4, No. 17, and No. 19. **See Figure 6.**

Two noteworthy points:

- 1) Since the NAEP tests in 2019, the performance of Black students in Florida public schools has fallen on all four tests – as they have nationwide.
- 2) Even relatively high rankings can mask troubling proficiency rates.

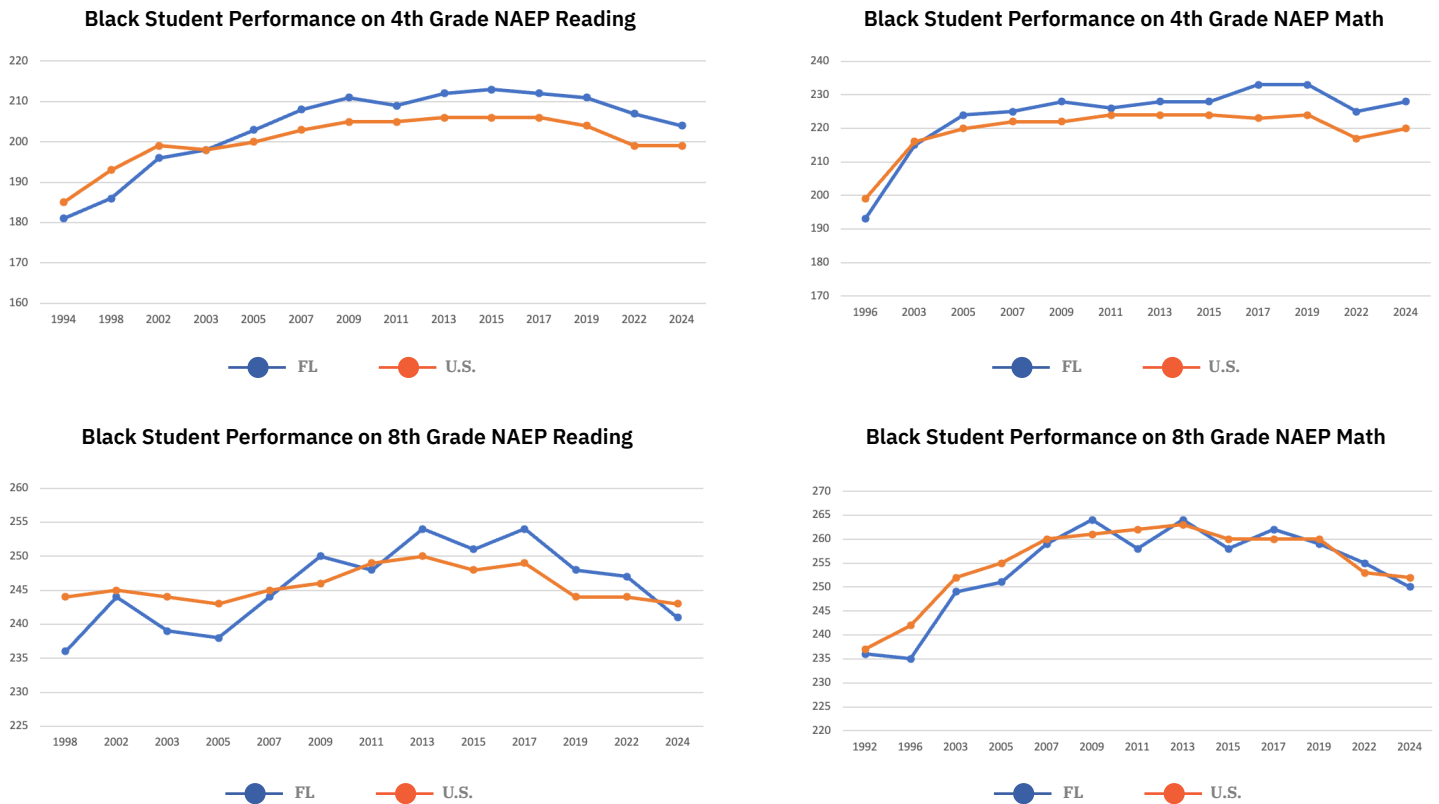
13. <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/states-demographically-adjusted-performance-2024-national-assessment>

14. Florida Education Commissioner Manny Diaz suggested the students tested for the 2024 NAEP may not have been statistically representative: <https://www.dailysignal.com/2025/01/29/make-the-national-assessment-of-educational-progress-great-again/>



Black fourth-graders in Florida rank No. 2 in math, but only 24 percent scored at or above proficient, compared to 56 percent of their white peers. In reading, they rank No. 4, with 18 percent scoring at or above proficient, compared to 41 percent of white students.

**FIGURE 6. FLORIDA BLACK STUDENT PERFORMANCE ON NAEP READING AND MATH TESTS**

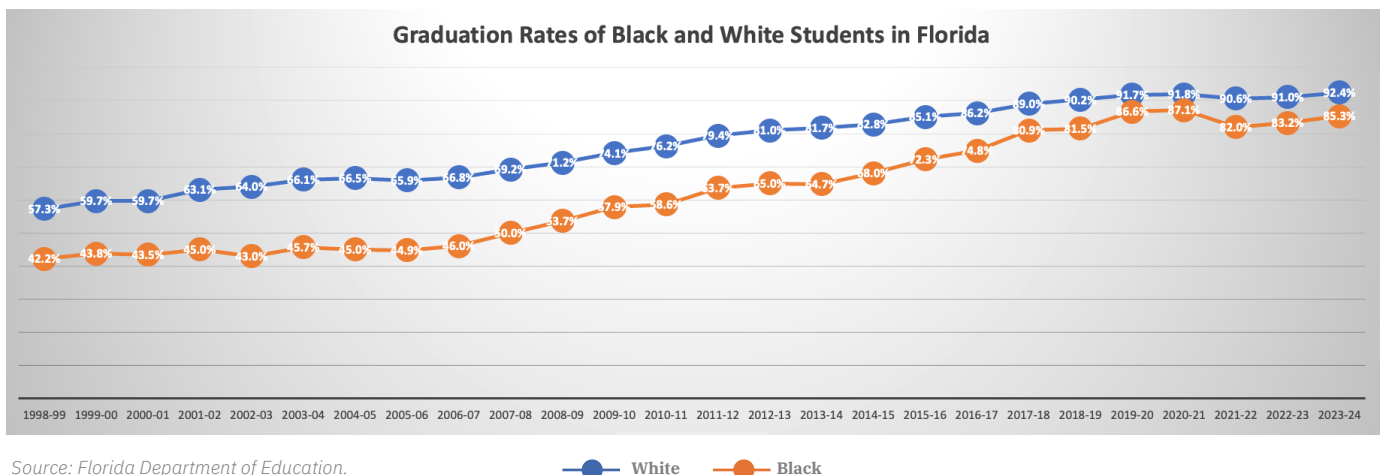


Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress.

## GRADUATION RATES

High school graduation rates for Black students in Florida continue to improve, while the gap between Black and white students continues to narrow. **See Figure 7.** Graduation rates received a boost during the pandemic, when the state removed a graduation requirement tied to exit exams. Those requirements were restored in 2021-22, resulting in a brief dip in rates. The 2023-24 rate was 85.3 percent for Black students and 92.4 percent for white students. That gap of 7.1 percentage points is down from 17 points 10 years prior.

**FIGURE 7. GRADUATION RATES OF FLORIDA BLACK AND WHITE STUDENTS SINCE 1999**



Source: Florida Department of Education.

# SPOTLIGHT:

Alicia Garcia | Project Flourish



Black education entrepreneurs aren't just creating new schools in Florida. A stellar example is Project Flourish, an "a la carte" education provider founded by former chef and teacher Alicia Garcia. Project Flourish specializes in cooking lessons that incorporate math, science, culture, trade, agriculture, and anything else related to food. "Food is applicable to every subject," Garcia said. "It's not just enrichment. It's life changing." What began as a part-time enterprise doing cooking lessons turned into Project Flourish in 2020. Now Garcia serves more than 500 students, half of them in South Florida's vibrant network of microschools.

More on Project Flourish [here](#). More on the rise of a la carte learning [here](#).

## DISCUSSION

School choice icon Howard Fuller embraced private school choice in the 1980s, frustrated by efforts to block Black communities from gaining more control over neighborhood public schools. Vouchers, he wrote in his autobiography, were "the next step in a logical progression of the struggle."<sup>15</sup>

Fuller and Wisconsin state Rep. Polly Williams went on to help establish the nation's first modern voucher program in Milwaukee. Three decades later, the education freedom movement they helped accelerate is on a historic roll – and Black students are benefitting.

Look no further than Florida, where education choice is the new normal. Black families in the Sunshine State are migrating in huge numbers to charter schools, private schools, and education savings accounts. Black educators are creating new options that trailblaze both education innovation and small business development. And Black communities are finding they can control their educational destinies in ways that may be unprecedented in American history.

The title of our 2021 report was inspired by a Black parent using choice scholarships to send her children to Icon Prep, a new private school founded by Florida A&M University alumni. "Options make it so that I can have a school that works for my child," she told us. With choice, "I get to control the narrative."

Icon Prep has since launched a second school in Florida, and some of its students have completed their first year of college while still in middle school.<sup>16</sup>

As education freedom expands, Black communities in other states will likewise leverage choice programs to access and create learning options they deem best. In the meantime, students, families, educators, and entrepreneurs in Florida can show them what's possible.

15. Howard Fuller with Lisa Frazier Page, *No Struggle No Progress: A Warrior's Life from Black Power to Education Reform* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2014), pp. 204-205.

16. <https://blacknews.com/news/black-middle-school-kids-florida-complete-first-year-college/>