AAUW Florida Priority: SB 202 / HB 1 SCHOOL CHOICE - OPPOSE

The American Association of University Women of Florida advances equity for women and girls through advocacy, education, and research.

HB1/SB202 – SCHOOL CHOICE

Background

Florida offers vouchers that parents can use to pay for educational services offered by a variety of providers through several scholarship programs: the Florida Tax Credit (FTC) scholarship; the Family Empowerment Scholarship Educational Opportunities (FES-EO); the Family Empowerment Scholarship Unique Abilities (FES-UA) for students with disabilities; the HOPE Scholarship program (for students who have been subjected to bullying, harassment, physical attack, and other forms of abuse at school); the New Worlds Reading Scholarship Accounts (for K-5 students who have performed significantly below grade level on state reading assessments). School choice options in Florida include private schools, charter schools, virtual education, magnet schools, and home schools.

There are income and eligibility restrictions on the program as it stands now. Students in households earning up to 375% of the federal poverty level ($104,063 for a family of four in 2022-23) are eligible for scholarships. Students who qualify under 200% of the federal poverty level ($55,500 for a family of four) are eligible for full scholarships worth up to $7,408. Funds can be used for tuition, resources, tutoring, transportation, and other related educational services. In the 21/22 school year, Florida ranked 1st in the nation in the amount of money spent for school choice programs, spending approximately $1.2 billion (roughly 4 percent of the total spent for K-12 education).

There are two Scholarship Funding Organizations (SFOs): A.A.A. Scholarship Foundation, FL, LLC located in Tampa and Step Up for Students, located in Jacksonville.

What HB1/SB202 Will Do

The primary purpose of HB1/SB202 is to revise Florida's School Choice program to remove income and eligibility requirements, making school choice available to any student in Florida and resulting in what is referred to as "universal choice." The bill provides definitions for all aspects of the school choice program; removes income requirements; revises the authorized uses of scholarship funds; defines responsibilities for all parties involved including parents and students; determines how award amounts are calculated; determines the extent of time scholarship funds can be made available to a student; defines ways participation could be restricted; defines public school district responsibilities for notifying parents of choice options; revises system to require direct funds transfers rather than endorsements of warrants; and otherwise defines all aspects of the management of the program. A link to the complete text of the bill is provided below.

HB1/SB202 will allow the children of parents whose household income does not exceed 185% of the federal poverty level ($51,338 for a family of four) to get priority to receive an FTC or FES-EO scholarship.

Financial Impact of Passage

The funds for this bill will be diverted from local public school districts. The Education Law Center and Florida Policy Institute estimate the following costs to Florida taxpayers from HB1:

- $1.1 billion for 124,063 students currently receiving FES vouchers;

- $890 million for 104,477 new FES vouchers for current public school students once the family income cap is lifted;
- $1.9 billion for 219,017 new FES vouchers for current private school students newly eligible for vouchers;
- $85 million for 10,000 new FES vouchers for home-schooled students newly eligible for vouchers.

Click on the link in "Resources" to see the proposed financial impact for your county.

Concerns

- ✓ Even though a student has qualified for a scholarship, it does not guarantee acceptance in a program. Also, the scholarship may not be enough to pay the cost of the desired educational program and to arrange for transportation. It would still be up to the family to make up the difference.
- ✓ The program has the potential to disproportionately benefit students who already have the financial resources to afford a private school education. An amendment proposed to cap income eligibility at $1 million was defeated.
- ✓ There is no provision in the bill requiring private schools to cap tuition increases. There is nothing to stop for-profit schools from greatly increasing their profit at the expense of local public school districts.
- ✓ There are concerns about private schools denying admission to students with disabilities, claiming they cannot provide the services needed as described on a student's IEP. An amendment proposed to require private schools to do so was defeated.
- ✓ There is no way to determine how the loss of public funds will affect local facilities, curriculum offerings, staffing issues, and availability of resources for students.

Relationship to AAUW Florida Mission

AAUW Florida aligns its public policy mission with AAUW. From the AAUW website:

AAUW believes that high-quality public education is the foundation of a democratic society and the key to improving economic prosperity and gender equality. We advocate equitable access to education and climates free of harassment, bullying, and sexual assault. We support academic freedom, civic education, protection from censorship, bias-free education, and responsible funding for all levels of education, including early childhood education and programs for students with disabilities. We advocate for increased and more equitable access to higher education, that is affordable and yields high quality credentials or degrees. We promote intentional, equity-focused efforts to close the persistent learning and opportunity gaps that disproportionately affect students from low-income and minority groups.

Position of AAUW Florida

The passage of HB1/SB202 contradicts AAUW's mission to support a strong, equitable public education system. The position of AAUW Florida is to oppose passage of HB1/SB202.

Resources:

https://www.myfloridahouse.gov/Sections/Bills/billsdetail.aspx?BillId=76982 Text of Florida HB1

www.fldoe.org Search for "School Choice."

www.edchoice.org/school-choice/state/florida/ On the right, click on the "Fast Facts" tab. Easy-to-read graphics illustrating where Florida's K-12 education dollars are spent and where students are attending school.

https://news.wfsu.org/state-news/2023-01-29/bill-to-expand-floridas-school-voucher-programs-gets-mixed-reaction

Florida's school choice bill clears first hurdle | WJCT News

Florida HB 1 and SB 202 (2023): Potential Fiscal Impacts (floridapolicy.org) (Includes an interactive map that allows the reader to see potential impact county by county)