



FLORIDA CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

BACKGROUNDER

PARENTAL EMPOWERMENT IN EDUCATION

SUPPORT: SB 902 (Simmons) & SB 1314 (Grimsley); HB 15 (Sullivan)

BACKGROUND:

Each year, the Florida Legislature discusses a number of education reform policies under the broad banner of “parental empowerment in education.” The general concept is that parents as the primary educators of their children are best positioned to determine exactly how to meet their own unique academic needs.

Leading the Way for Other States: Florida continues to be a national leader in school choice. Our state has one of the oldest and largest parental empowerment initiatives, the Florida Tax Credit (FTC) Scholarship Program, established in 2001. The program serves more than 98,000 students from low-to-middle income families, including 16,400 in Catholic schools.

Serving Children with Unique Abilities: Another thrust of Florida’s school choice movement has been to make appropriate levels of funding and services available to children with special education needs. These include students with cerebral palsy or Down syndrome (among other disabilities). The state’s John M. McKay Program for Students with Disabilities was launched in 1999 and the Gardiner Scholarship Program was established in 2014. McKay serves more than 30,300 students including 3,400-plus in Catholic schools. There are 7,400 students on Gardiner scholarships including 353 in Catholic schools.

BILL PROVISIONS:

- Establishes a higher per-child scholarship amount for high school students in the FTC Scholarship Program (SB 1314 and HB 15).
- Expands eligibility for the Gardiner scholarships to include deaf students and students with a wider range of impairments (SB 902).

RATIONALE:

Fiscal-impact studies on state scholarship programs show that they save taxpayer money that can be reinvested in public schools. For example, the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability estimated the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program saved the state \$36.2 million in 2008.

While supporting school choice, the FCCB also supports efforts to develop a strong system of public schools. There are more than 300,000 Catholic school students who attend public schools in Florida. Schools serve a vital role in society when they educate children to contribute to the common good and become responsible citizens.

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