



CATHOLIC SCHOOL UPDATE BRIEF 2025



Florida Catholic Conference
& Step Up For Students

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Introduction

Recent headlines from Florida and New York underscore key trend lines for Catholic schools in America.

In New York, the headlines reflect what’s still happening in much of the country. In early 2025, seven more Catholic schools in New York City announced they would close at the end of the school year. The New York Post described them as “falling like dominoes.” ¹

In Florida, the headlines offer hope: A new Catholic school opening in the Keys². A new Catholic school opening in Orlando.³ A new Catholic school opening in the Panhandle.⁴

Over the past decade, no state in the Top 10 for Catholic school enrollment has seen a bigger drop than New York (-31.0%) – and no state has seen more growth than Florida (+12.1%). There’s every reason to believe those trends will continue, given Florida’s embrace of school choice – and, in New York, lawmakers’ continued resistance.

For years, Florida has been the lone outlier. But as education choice continues its historic march across America, it’s no longer hard to envision other states joining Florida in the growth column. Indeed, the latest figures from the National Catholic Educational Association show year-over-year growth in several states with big Catholic school sectors and substantial choice programs,⁵ including Iowa (+2.4%), Wisconsin (+1.3%), and Ohio (+0.7%).

Florida shows what’s possible. In 2023, we published a special report, “Why Catholic Schools in Florida Are Growing: 5 Things to Know,” to put a bigger spotlight on the Sunshine State.⁶ We thought the Florida experience could offer useful lessons to Catholic school supporters in other states. In 2024, we issued an update to our report after the latest figures showed continued growth for Florida.⁷ Ditto for why we’re updating the report this year. (See Figure 1)

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

State	2014-15	2024-25	Change	%Change
California	210,788	183,714	-27,074	-12.8%
New York	175,677	121,174	-54,503	-31.0%
Ohio	131,139	120,066	-11,073	-8.4%
Illinois	144,167	112,407	-31,760	-22.0%
Pennsylvania	132,726	102,509	-30,217	-22.8%
Florida	82,816	92,863	+10,047	+12.1%
Louisiana	79,745	70,293	-9,452	-11.9%
Texas	78,070	64,243	-13,787	-17.7%
New Jersey	82,978	58,387	-24,591	-29.6%
Missouri	62,520	55,673	-6,847	-11.0%
U.S.	1,939,574	1,683,506	-256,068	-13.2%

Source: National Catholic Educational Association

The Florida story should give us all reason to cheer. For generations, Catholic schools have uplifted families from all walks of life, including working-class families, often whether those families were Catholic or not. The most recent outcomes on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), aka “The Nation’s Report Card,” put another exclamation point on their success.

A decade ago, as our colleague Matthew Ladner pointed out, Catholic school students were outperforming their public school peers by a grade level to a grade and a half on NAEP tests in reading and math. But the most recent NAEP results, released in January, show the “Catholic school advantage” has grown on some of those tests to nearly two grade levels.⁸

Like last year, our update brief includes a year-by-year breakdown of Catholic school enrollment, going back 10 years, for all 50 states.

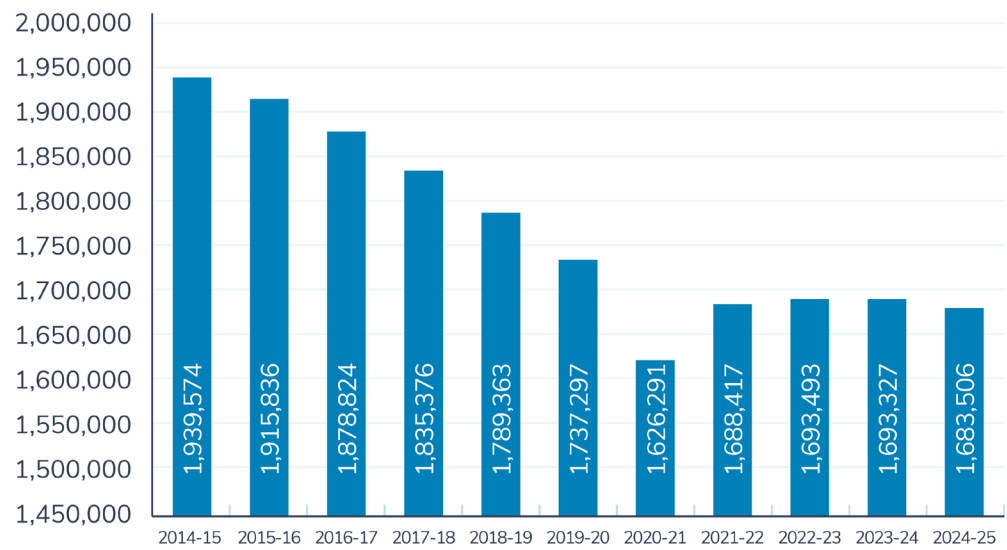
We look forward to watching the next states gain traction.

Enrollment

Catholic school enrollment across America largely held steady this year, for a third straight year since rebounding from Covid. Given years of steady decline, stability is good news. (See Figure 2)

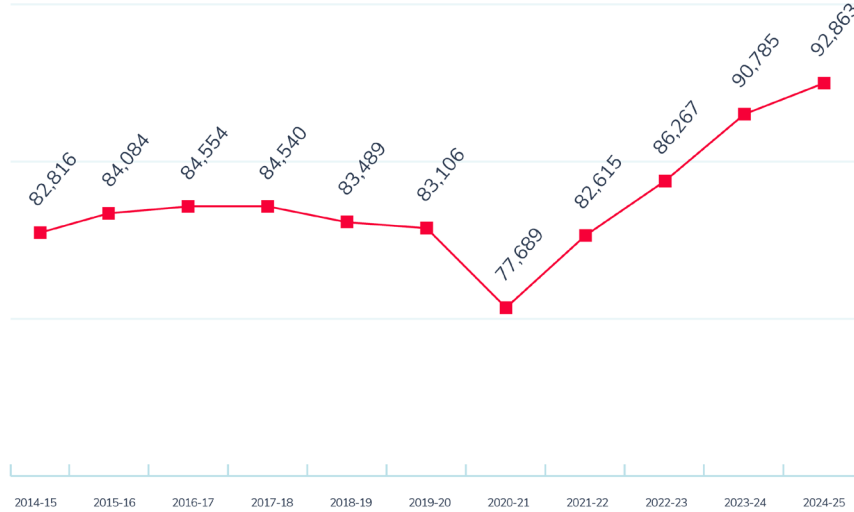
In Florida, enrollment climbed 2.3%, marking a fourth straight year of growth. The uptick comes in the second year since Gov. Ron DeSantis signed into law HB 1, which made every student in the state eligible for a state-supported choice scholarship. (See Figure 3)

Figure 2. Nationwide Catholic School Enrollment in PreK-12



Source: National Catholic Educational Association

Figure 3. Florida Catholic School Enrollment in PreK-12

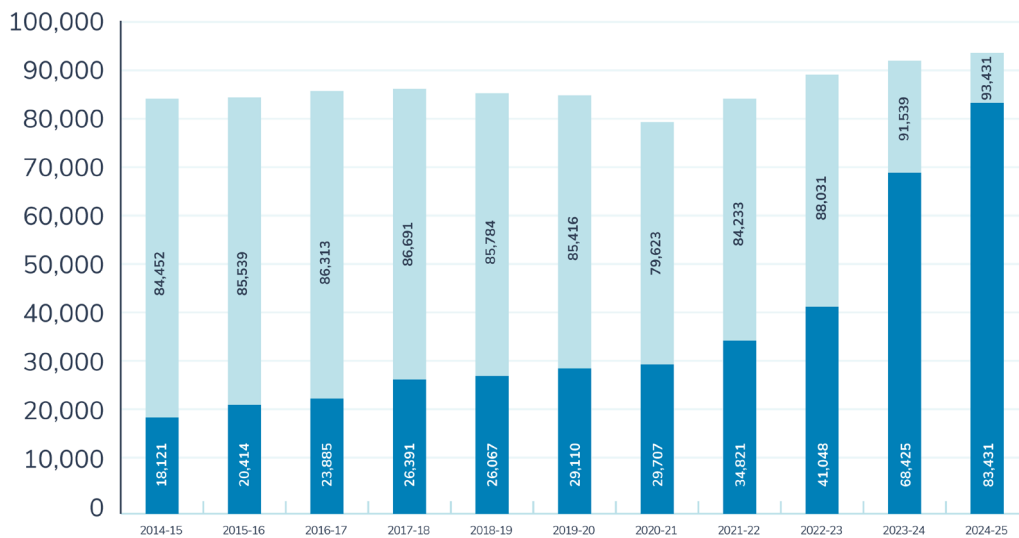


Source: National Catholic Educational Association

Choice

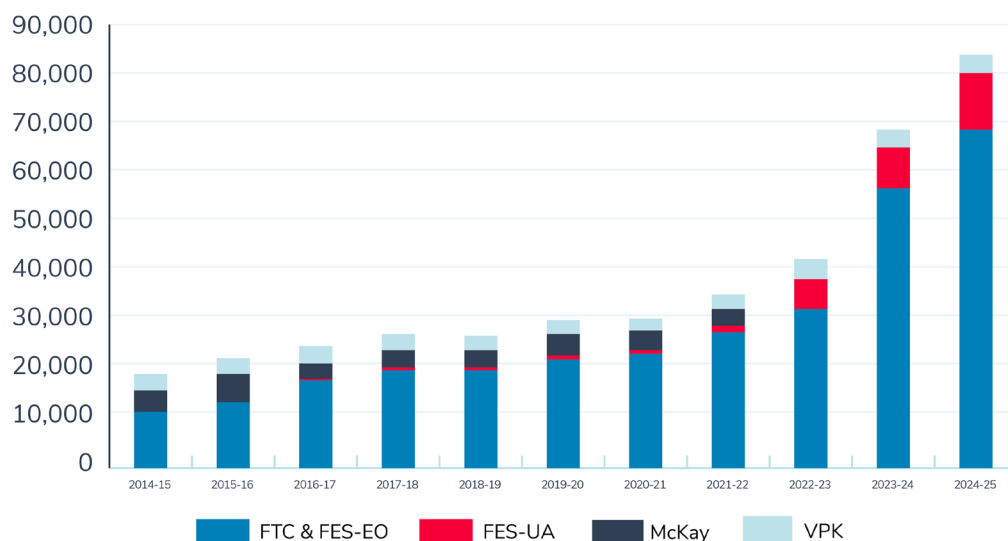
In the wake of HB 1, the share of Florida Catholic school students using choice scholarships has continued to rise sharply. (See Figure 4). Florida Catholic schools also continue to use the full menu of scholarships (See Figure 5) (For a primer on the different scholarships, see Appendix B in the original white paper.)

Figure 4. Share of Choice Scholarship Students in Florida Catholic Schools



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

Figure 5. Enrollment in Florida Catholic Schools by Scholarship Type

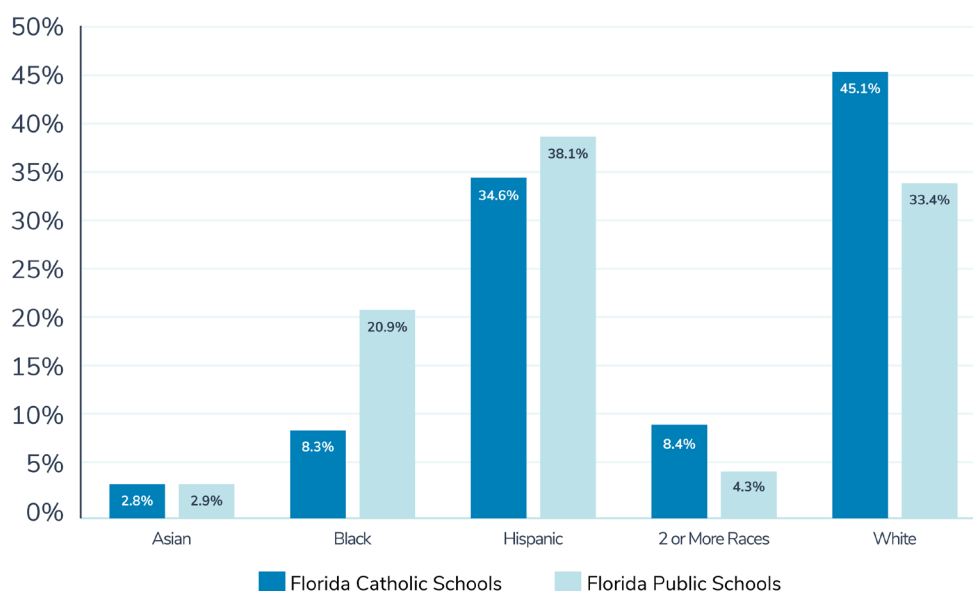


Source: Florida Catholic Conference. Note: The McKay and FES-UA scholarships, both for students with special needs, merged in 2022. The FTC and FESEO scholarships are for general population students.

Diversity

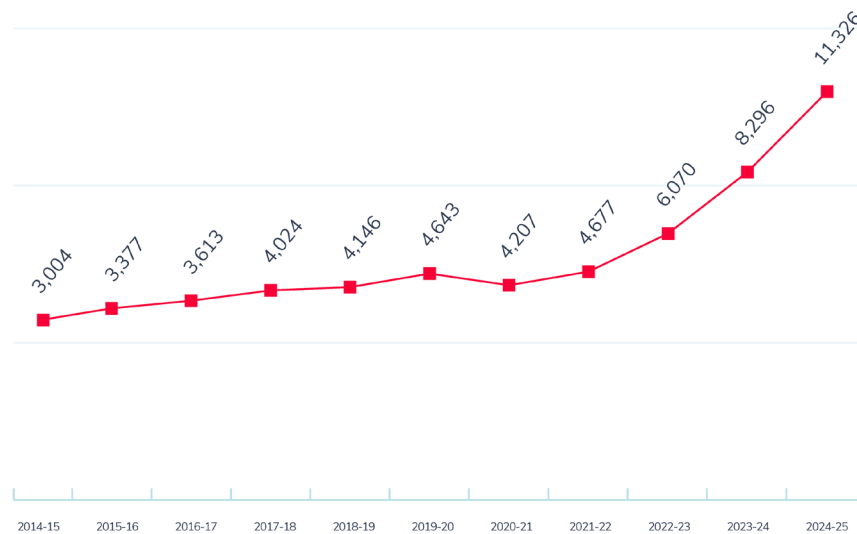
Our prior white paper and update brief noted Catholic schools in Florida have become increasingly diverse in terms of race and ethnicity. For the 2024-25 report, however, the Florida Catholic Conference and the NCEA adopted a different reporting methodology,⁹ making comparisons to past data impossible. For this update, we simply note the most recent numbers, and, where possible, compare them to the 2024-25 numbers for Florida public schools. (See Figure 6). We also note strong continued growth in the number of Florida Catholic school students using special needs scholarships. (See Figure 7)

Figure 6. Minority Student Share in Florida Catholic Schools, 2024-25



Sources: Florida Catholic Conference and Florida Department of Education. Note: The totals here do not add up to 100% because some race/ethnicity categories with small percentages of students were excluded.

Figure 7. Special Needs Scholarship Students in Florida Catholic Schools



Source: Florida Catholic Conference

Discussion

A new study highlighted in this spring's edition of Education Next, under the headline "Catholic Schools Can't Compete," found Catholic schools nationwide have suffered enrollment losses as charter schools have sprouted by the thousands.¹⁰

That outcome is not surprising. Charter schools are tuition-free, while Catholic schools are not.

But as the researchers suggest, the story might be different if parents had private school choice scholarships to access the learning options they truly prefer.

In other words, on a more level playing field, Catholic schools can compete.

This certainly seems to be the case in Florida. Roughly 50 percent of all K-12 students in the Sunshine State are now enrolled in something other than their zoned schools,¹¹ including 1 million educated outside of district schools entirely.¹² Charter schools are a big part of that choice-driven landscape, with more than 700 schools and 400,000 students. And yet, Catholic schools in Florida lead the country in growth, accruing to the benefit of tens of thousands of students every year.

Zori Brown is one of them.¹³ After attending a charter school in South Florida, Zori chose St. Thomas Aquinas High School in Fort Lauderdale because she wanted a school that was top tier in athletics and academics. Without a choice scholarship, the tuition would have been out of reach for her mom. But with a scholarship, Zori was able to attend the school, star on the volleyball team, and finish near the top of her class. This fall, she's headed to Dartmouth College, the Ivy League school in New Hampshire.

The acceleration of education choice across the country – including the real possibility of a federal choice program¹⁴ – means more options and opportunity for more students like Zori.

For Catholic schools, it also means the possibility of again serving growing numbers of families. Florida offers proof.

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

10-year enrollment for US Catholic Schools															
State	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	Change from 2024	% Change from 2024	Change 2015-2025	% Change 2015-2025
Alabama	12,605	12,230	11,905	11,533	10,992	10,602	9,353	9,831	9,546	9,735	9,700	-35	-0.4%	-2,905	-23.0%
Alaska	935	906	958	1,001	992	942	689	909	869	847	890	43	5.1%	-45	-4.8%
Arizona	19,868	20,282	20,604	20,693	20,647	20,429	20,322	20,761	20,817	21,346	21,449	103	0.5%	1,581	8.0%
Arkansas	6,889	6,776	6,799	6,706	6,643	6,498	6,143	6,293	6,428	6,599	6,810	211	3.2%	-79	-1.1%
California	210,788	210,971	207,925	204,239	199,529	196,117	177,331	186,473	187,101	186,199	183,714	-2,485	-1.3%	-27,074	-12.8%
Colorado	15,226	15,103	15,100	15,038	15,033	14,746	15,205	15,989	15,979	16,165	16,078	-87	-0.5%	852	5.6%
Connecticut	29,174	27,949	26,838	25,391	23,861	22,030	20,134	20,546	20,648	20,723	20,495	-228	-1.1%	-8,679	-29.7%
Delaware	10,418	10,391	10,092	9,805	9,685	9,420	8,520	8,675	8,885	9,004	8,815	-189	-2.1%	-1,603	-15.4%
Florida	82,816	84,084	84,554	84,540	83,489	83,106	77,689	82,615	86,267	90,785	92,863	2,078	2.3%	10,047	12.1%
Georgia	16,546	16,537	16,608	16,348	16,096	15,445	15,260	15,581	15,578	15,664	15,529	-135	-0.9%	-1,017	-6.10%
Hawaii	9,163	8,923	8,911	8,604	8,119	7,503	6,726	7,014	6,640	6,236	5,801	-435	-7.0%	-3,362	-36.7%
Idaho	3,171	3,175	3,290	3,499	3,590	3,709	3,715	4,057	4,048	3,984	3,960	-24	-0.6%	789	24.9%
Illinois	144,167	140,285	135,456	130,123	126,814	122,286	112,258	116,182	114,936	113,361	112,407	-954	-0.8%	-31,760	-22.0%
Indiana	56,605	55,908	55,623	55,212	54,317	52,325	48,586	50,884	52,628	52,844	52,755	-89	-0.2%	-3,850	-6.8%
Iowa	28,926	29,270	28,964	28,704	28,269	27,764	26,565	27,187	26,868	28,680	29,358	678	2.4%	432	1.5%
Kansas	28,629	28,365	28,280	27,974	27,469	27,262	25,753	26,540	26,674	26,666	26,657	-9	0.0%	-1,972	-6.9%
Kentucky	36,710	36,362	36,424	36,277	35,332	34,745	33,343	34,815	34,764	35,275	35,845	570	1.6%	-865	-2.4%
Louisiana	79,745	78,540	76,945	75,238	73,812	72,215	69,176	69,559	70,317	70,333	70,293	-40	-0.1%	-9,452	-11.9%
Maine	2,965	2,858	2,653	2,533	2,347	1,587	2,104	2,288	2,273	1,944	1,727	-217	-11.2%	-1,238	-41.8%
Maryland	25,633	25,287	25,105	24,727	23,861	23,643	23,400	24,297	24,727	24,744	24,749	5	0.0%	-884	-3.4%
Massachusetts	57,057	56,331	53,800	51,402	48,899	46,786	43,236	46,235	46,116	45,547	45,479	-68	-0.1%	-11,578	-20.3%
Michigan	53,994	53,681	53,027	51,297	50,257	48,246	46,332	49,215	50,386	49,812	49,632	-180	-0.4%	-4,362	-8.1%
Minnesota	44,771	43,554	43,082	42,914	42,642	41,774	41,526	44,830	45,342	44,870	45,488	618	1.4%	717	1.6%
Mississippi	7,922	7,723	7,693	7,675	7,476	7,391	6,947	7,584	7,521	7,331	7,437	106	1.4%	-485	-6.1%
Missouri	62,520	61,379	59,838	58,403	57,574	56,486	53,971	55,612	55,780	55,326	55,673	347	0.6%	-6,847	-11.0%
Montana	3,900	3,880	3,886	3,791	3,830	3,845	3,588	3,743	3,848	3,542	3,687	145	4.1%	-213	-5.5%
Nebraska	27,898	28,868	29,219	29,057	28,847	28,391	26,745	27,100	27,118	26,935	27,257	322	1.2%	-641	-2.3%
Nevada	5,645	5,665	5,590	5,462	5,322	5,165	5,392	5,498	5,585	5,561	5,582	21	0.4%	-63	-1.1%
New Hampshire	6,104	5,804	5,617	5,363	5,415	5,185	5,304	5,649	5,678	5,707	5,550	-157	-2.8%	-554	-9.1%
New Jersey	82,978	80,303	76,578	72,957	69,392	65,497	58,653	60,923	59,645	59,461	58,387	-1,074	-1.8%	-24,591	-29.6%
New Mexico	6,284	6,239	5,877	5,811	5,653	5,447	4,978	5,129	4,516	4,936	5,029	93	1.9%	-1,255	-20.0%
New York	175,677	170,717	165,651	159,447	153,606	145,858	132,822	133,887	129,893	124,638	121,174	-3,464	-2.8%	-54,503	-31.0%
North Carolina	16,621	16,504	16,361	16,089	16,051	16,000	15,686	16,849	17,451	17,730	17,911	181	1.0%	1,290	7.8%
North Dakota	4,647	4,722	4,813	4,802	4,960	4,980	4,997	5,277	5,203	5,560	5,693	133	2.4%	1,046	22.5%
Ohio	131,139	129,349	127,176	125,688	123,749	121,315	116,654	118,859	118,861	119,285	120,066	781	0.7%	-11,073	-8.4%
Oklahoma	9,599	9,627	9,579	9,515	9,710	9,575	8,925	9,051	9,160	9,309	9,458	149	1.6%	-141	-1.5%
Oregon	15,521	15,447	15,201	15,262	15,249	15,136	14,322	15,606	15,513	15,325	12,534	-2,791	-18.2%	-2,987	-19.2%
Pennsylvania	132,726	131,018	126,771	122,569	117,290	111,835	103,464	105,432	104,108	104,533	102,509	-2,024	-1.9%	-30,217	-22.8%
Rhode Island	12,671	11,767	11,428	10,825	10,367	9,918	9,192	9,637	9,612	9,731	8,518	-1,213	-12.5%	-4,153	-32.8%
South Carolina	7,085	7,206	7,273	7,164	7,042	6,908	6,981	7,157	7,523	7,588	7,583	-5	-0.1%	498	7.0%
South Dakota	5,880	5,814	5,545	5,729	5,649	5,579	5,328	5,449	5,386	5,500	5,486	-14	-0.3%	-394	-6.7%
Tennessee	16,859	16,728	16,384	16,196	15,519	13,844	12,658	13,897	14,435	14,204	12,896	-1,308	-9.2%	-3,963	-23.5%
Texas	78,070	77,188	74,967	71,887	70,022	67,348	60,626	62,256	64,243	64,501	64,283	-218	-0.3%	-13,787	-17.7%
Utah	5,327	5,441	5,231	5,209	5,016	4,757	4,362	4,757	4,848	4,755	4,954	199	4.2%	-373	-7.0%
Vermont	2,040	1,997	1,979	1,944	1,951	1,908	1,835	2,006	1,972	2,079	2,155	76	3.7%	115	5.6%
Virginia	26,456	26,556	26,541	26,290	25,947	25,518	25,061	27,269	27,717	27,802	27,415	-387	-1.4%	959	3.6%
Washington	28,042	28,145	28,049	27,677	25,795	26,748	25,221	26,989	27,029	27,290	27,492	202	0.7%	-550	-2.0%
Washington D.C.	26,960	26,822	26,856	26,254	26,171	25,693	24,374	25,557	26,074	26,168	26,350	182	0.7%	-610	-2.3%
West Virginia	5,640	5,667	5,448	5,112	4,965	4,627	4,045	4,259	4,422	4,564	4,653	89	2.0%	-987	-17.5%
Wisconsin	57,559	56,518	55,411	54,427	53,090	52,226	50,054	51,497	51,723	51,820	52,492	672	1.3%	-5,067	-8.8%
Wyoming	1,003	974	919	973	1,010	937	740	712	792	783	788	5	0.6%	-215	-21.4%
United States	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	1,683,506	-9,821	-0.6%	-256,068	-13.2%

Endnotes

- ¹ Katherine Donlevy, “7 NYC Catholic schools announce closings in past month as experts blame skyrocketing tuition, loss of religion,” The New York Post, Feb. 16, 2025, <https://nypost.com/2025/02/16/us-news/seven-nyc-catholic-schools-announce-in-past-month-alone-they-are-closing-as-experts-blame-tuition-loss-of-religion/>
- ² Roger Mooney, “Choice Scholarships essential to Key West Catholic school expansion,” Florida Politics, January 27, 2025, <https://floridapolitics.com/archives/717930-roger-mooney-choice-scholarships-essential-to-key-west-catholic-school-expansion/>
- ³ Julie Gargotta, “New high school in Orange County will open doors in more ways than one,” Spectrum News 13, February 21, 2025, <https://mynews13.com/fl/orlando/news/2025/02/21/high-school-opens-doors>
- ⁴ “New Catholic School to Open in Niceville in 2025,” Mid Bay News, January 27, 2025, <https://midbaynews.com/post/new-catholic-school-to-open-in-niceville-in-2025>
- ⁵ “United States Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools 2024-2025: The Annual Statistical Report on Schools, Enrollment, and Staffing,” National Catholic Educational Association, April 16, 2025.
- ⁶ Lauren May, Patrick Gibbons, and Ron Matus, “Why Florida Catholic Schools Are Growing: 5 Things to Know,” Next Steps (blog), August 22, 2023, <https://nextstepsblog.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Original-SUFS-White-Paper-Final.pdf>
- ⁷ Lauren May, Mary Camp, Patrick Gibbons, and Ron Matus, “Why Florida Catholic Schools Are Growing: 5 Things to Know” (update brief), Next Steps (blog), April 1, 2024, <https://nextstepsblog.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/SUFS-Expanded-White-Paper-Catholic-Schools-In-Florida-UPDATED.pdf>
- ⁸ Matthew Ladner, “‘D-Minus’ for Public School, but Catholic Schools Shine in Latest Academic Assessment,” The Daily Signal, February 13, 2025, <https://www.dailysignal.com/2025/02/13/nations-report-card-shows-failing-public-school-performance-growing-catholic-school-advantage/>
- ⁹ “United States Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools 2024-2025,” p. 24.
- ¹⁰ Shaun M. Dougherty, Andrew Miller, and Yerin Yoon, “Catholic Schools Can’t Compete: Tuition-free Charter Schools Dominate School Choice,” Education Next 25, 2 (Spring 2025): 56-61, <https://www.educationnext.org/catholic-schools-cant-compete-tuition-free-charter-schools-dominate-school-choice/>
- ¹¹ Patrick R. Gibbons, “Florida sets new education choice records as 1.7 million students choose,” Next Steps (blog), February 5, 2024, <https://nextstepsblog.org/2024/02/florida-sets-new-education-choice-records-as-1-7-million-students-choose/>
- ¹² In the 2022–2023 school year, 981,723 Florida students were enrolled in private schools, charter schools, and home education, according to data available on the Florida Department of Education website and compiled by the authors. Given the trend lines, it’s all but certain that Florida surpassed one million students enrolled in nondistrict options in 2023–2024. But as of the time of this writing, the official 2023–2024 enrollment numbers for private schools and home education were not available.
- ¹³ Roger Mooney, “Taking advantage of her opportunities, Zori reaches Step 1 of her life plan – an Ivy League scholarship,” Next Steps (blog), April 7, 2025, <https://www.stepupforstudents.org/blog/taking-advantage-of-her-opportunities-zori-reaches-step-1-of-her-life-plan-an-ivy-league-scholarship/>
- ¹⁴ <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/833>

About the Authors



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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 multiple education choice scholarship programs in Florida, including Private School Scholarships, Unique Ability Scholarships, and Personalized Education Program (PEP) Scholarships.