

# Better Scholarships and Stronger Neighborhoods

A New A+ Plan for K12 Education to Address Unmet Needs

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More than 20 years ago, a coalition of Florida education reformers that included Governor Jeb Bush and JMI founder Stan Marshall worked together to advance the A+ Plan for K-12 Education. This ambitious initiative included a combination of accountability measures (such as an A-to-F school grading system) and new education choice opportunities (including Florida's first K-12 scholarship program).

The original A+ Plan proved to be an extraordinary success. It helped catapult Florida from the Bottom 10 to the Top 5 in various state-by-state K-12 education rankings.<sup>1</sup> It established Florida as a national leader in education reform generally, and in school choice specifically.<sup>2</sup> And it inspired several other states to adopt education reforms and scholarship programs modeled after those in Florida.

While the impact of the original A+ Plan has been extraordinary and far-reaching, many Florida families have yet to benefit directly from school choice – or to benefit fully from all that a skillfully-crafted education choice policy could bring. Consider:

- Some students remain ineligible for scholarships, even though their parents pay taxes and the state will fund their education if they attend a public school.
- Some families have education choice only in theory. They qualify for scholarships, but this doesn't have much practical benefit because current vouchers can only be used for school tuition – and they live in a sparsely-populated area that does not have any alternative schools.
- Some scholarship recipients living in disadvantaged communities continue to suffer from what Harvard scholar Raj Chetty calls a dearth of “positive neighborhood effects.”<sup>3</sup> For these students, the primary challenge isn't access to meaningful school choice – it is overcoming the residual effects of assigned school policies on neighborhood composition.

Thus, a *New A+ Plan* is needed – and it should be designed to provide universal coverage for all students, real choices for families that lack them, and new opportunities for those living in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Specifically, Florida's New A+ Plan for K-12 Education should offer flexible-use scholarships to all Florida families (the A) with weighted funding for special populations, including those living in Title I neighborhoods that need revitalization (the Plus).

Such a policy would be good at any point in time; but a New A+ Plan crafted along these lines would be especially well-suited for our post-COVID world. For in today's “new normal,” more and more people are interested in new ways to educate their children, new places to raise their children, and new strategies for stimulating “positive neighborhood effects” in disadvantaged communities.

Let's take a closer look at each of these developments.

## New Ways to Educate Children

In the early days of COVID, many national observers thought the temporary measures that families adopted to deal with school lockdowns would be just that: temporary. Once schools fully re-

opened and fears of COVID subsided, they expected “DIY” education strategies – such as pod learning, homeschooling, virtual education, and micro-schooling – to quickly return to pre-pandemic levels.

But that has not occurred. Public school enrollment is down in most parts of the country.<sup>4</sup> Homeschooling numbers remain well above their pre-pandemic levels (especially among African Americans).<sup>5</sup> The same is true for virtual learning, where some very innovative new programs using immersive technology are winning critical acclaim.<sup>6</sup> And small, highly-personalized learning communities – such as micro-schools, learning pods, and hybrid homeschools – continue to draw considerable interest from young

families. In fact, the share of parents interested in participating in a learning pod increased 10 percentage points from May 2022 to October 2022, according to a Morning Consult tracking survey.<sup>7</sup>

Scholar Kerry McDonald believes “educational diversity” is one reason these alternative forms of education “are here to stay.”<sup>8</sup>

“Today's micro-schools,” she writes, “represent all ideological and political persuasions, embrace a variety of educational philosophies and approaches, and use a wide assortment of curriculum resources and learning tools, including, in some instances, standardized tests and traditional curriculum.” This diversity means today's “micro” movement is “less apt to fade with changing cultural or political trends,” unlike the “free school” movement that arose briefly out of the 1960s counter-culture.<sup>9</sup>

McDonald says current school choice voucher programs are also helping to boost the sustainability of micro-education enterprises formally operating as private schools. Many families are drawn to these emerging enterprises because they like smaller, more personalized environments. They want curriculum tailored to the individual child's interests, needs, and learning styles. And they appreciate the fact that their child can more easily get extra attention in certain subjects (especially in view of learning losses resulting from the pandemic).

Interestingly, a growing number of educators share parents' enthusiasm for “micro” options. They have rediscovered the joy of teaching, free from the often stifling regulations of big school bureaucracies, by moving into the “micro” sector as education entrepreneurs. A major 2022 report by scholars at Ed-Choice and Step Up for Students closely examined 10 such enterprises in Florida.<sup>10</sup> It found that many of these education entrepreneurs initially left the public school system because they did not think it was serving their own children well. Like Jaime Manfra, the founder of two Tampa area micro-schools JMI recently visited

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(see adjoining sidebar), these education entrepreneurs have found that recruiting families and teachers to join their micro-school community is easier than many might imagine. Indeed, more than half (55 percent) the teachers surveyed in a recent Morning Consult poll expressed at least some interest in facilitating a learning pod.<sup>11</sup> And McDonald reports that South Florida, in particular, has become a “large hub of education entrepreneurship.”<sup>12</sup>

Of course, micro enterprises aren’t the only private alternatives thriving in the wake of the pandemic. Hebrew school enrollment has exploded, especially in South Florida (thanks to many Jewish families moving from the New York City area).<sup>13</sup> Catholic schools got a big boost from the recent results of the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), which showed that Catholic school test scores were less adversely affected by the pandemic than any other group.<sup>14</sup> And many other Florida private schools are experiencing steady growth.

Here again, school choice vouchers are making a big difference, especially in densely populated areas. In fact, 170,000 Florida students now utilize one of the Sunshine State’s private school choice scholarship programs<sup>15</sup> – and three-quarters of these scholarship recipients attend a faith-based school (thereby lending support to scholar Jay Greene’s contention that many parents view education as more than just a utilitarian endeavor in acquiring economically-useful job skills).<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, many families are finding school choice to be the best solution to some of the divisive conflicts in K-12 education that have arisen in recent years. For example, during the fall of 2021, several public school districts sought to defy Florida’s prohibition on mask mandates in public schools. Governor DeSantis responded by offering Hope Scholarships to students harassed by local school officials over masks. But in a move that many national media outlets completely overlooked, DeSantis also authorized Hope Scholarship assistance for families uncomfortable with sending their children to mask-optional public schools.<sup>17</sup> As such, Florida gave all families the opportunity to enroll their child in a school that shared their masking preferences. Rather than perpetuating a high-stakes, zero-sum battle in which only one side could get its way, Florida found a way to accommodate the concerns of families with very different needs, preferences, and convictions.

The key to this accommodation? School choice.

In many ways, the emergence of a post-COVID “new normal” should not surprise anyone. Parents have long expressed broad support for school choice policies. And three in five parents have, for some time, said their ideal schooling option is something other than an assigned public school. In fact, 40% of all parents identify

private schooling as their ideal option; another 12% say charter school; and 7% say home-schooling.<sup>18</sup>

So, a latent longing for alternatives to public schooling existed prior to COVID; but the pandemic increased – and intensified – the pent-up demand for wider schooling options.

In a 2022 survey with more than 3,000 respondents, Tyton Partners found that 59 percent of all parents say their attitudes about public education have changed since the pandemic first hit.<sup>19</sup> More than half (52 percent) now say they would “prefer to direct and curate their child’s education” rather than defer to their local school system.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, 71 percent of all parents now support a “unified system of K-12 funding where dollars follow students

to the educational setting of their family’s choosing,” according to a 2022 Braun Research survey.<sup>21</sup> Four out of five parents now support flexible-use scholarships commonly known as Education Savings Accounts.<sup>22</sup>

“What we’re hearing from parents loud and clear is they feel a greater sense of ownership over their child’s education,” says Christian Lehr of Tyton Partners. “Parents are actively searching for new experiences that will deliver on academic promises, yes, but also bring joy and delight.”<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, given the still-sizeable gap between schooling preferences and schooling practices, one might easily ask: Why aren’t we seeing even higher enrollment numbers for alternatives to traditional public schools? The answer, at least in Florida, has a lot to do with the effects of population density – and policy restrictions – on learning options.

“Unfortunately, not all families can live out their K-12 aspirations,” Lehr says. “Too many parents are stuck. We must work hard to connect families with a broader set of learning opportunities and provide

them the resources and tools necessary to act.”<sup>24</sup>

All of which brings us to our next topic.

## New Places to Raise Children

In the early days of COVID, many national observers thought that some of the temporary measures that employers adopted to deal with the pandemic would be just that: temporary. Once the pandemic passed and commercial establishments fully re-opened, they expected that COVID-common practices like remote work would largely fade away – and large, centralized cities would regain their “COVID refugees” who left for less-populous areas during the lockdowns.

As with schooling, a post-pandemic “new normal” in work and residency patterns is taking shape instead.

# Micro-school pioneer: If I can do it, so can you

## RON MATUS

*EDITOR'S NOTE: Earlier this year, The James Madison Institute had the opportunity to do in-school civics programs for two innovative micro-schools started by education entrepreneur Jaime Manfra. Soon thereafter, our friend Ron Matus at Step Up for Students featured Manfra in this article, which originally appeared at reimaginED.*

CLEARWATER, Fla. – Before all the buzz about learning pods and micro-schools, some folks were already creating learning pods and micro-schools.

Jaime Manfra went down this path 10 years ago.

Her Service Learning Micro-school (SLS) is all about flexibility, diversity, community service. Students here spend a lot of time helping others, whether it's making sandwiches for the homeless, volunteering at a horse rescue, or playing balloon volleyball with residents at the assisted living facility next door.

"Service is love in action, it's virtue in action," Manfra said. Students "need concrete ways of applying kindness."

SLS isn't for everybody. But with education choice, it shows what's possible for everybody. Options that can be created and customized. *For* and *by* families and educators. To address whatever needs *they* feel are paramount.

To be sure, hurdles remain. SLS, for example, wrestled for years with finding a good facility. But policies to maximize flexibility for families and educators continue to get traction.

As they do, more problem-solvers like Manfra will find a way.

SLS began as a pod in 2012.

Manfra's son Ajay turned out to be too much of a square peg for public school. So Manfra, who once taught classes in natural medicine, began homeschooling Ajay & a handful of other students.

Word spread. The pod grew.

Now SLS has 44 students in K-12, most in middle & high.

All but two use school choice scholarships.

About 75 percent attended public schools. Many left because of peer pressure and bullying. Others left because of an academic environment their parents described as stifling.

At SLS, they found smaller classes, a competency-based approach, and far less pressure.

"I don't see my children suffering anymore," said Soji Jacobs, who enrolled her three children in SLS last fall. "They're no longer ruled by grades, like it was decided who you were in life based on a grade," continued Jacobs, a floral designer and former private school teacher. "They feel at home. They're accepted for who they are. They're genuinely loved."

Barbara Warne enrolled her daughter Elizabeth into SLS six



*Students at Manfra's micro-school in Clearwater took part in a JMI program on principles of persuasion called, "CounterSpeech." They learned about some 1960s Florida A & M students who skillfully exercised their free speech rights to convince others to end segregated lunch counters.*

years ago, after six years at a highly touted magnet school. The school has a long waiting list, but for Elizabeth, who has ADHD, it never worked.

"I was brainwashed into thinking that this was the best school choice," said Warne, a stay-at-home mom whose husband is an Army veteran and airplane mechanic. "Every day, they made her feel like a failure. It started to get to her mentally."

Warne said she was sold on SLS as soon as she and Elizabeth attended an open house. She watched her daughter interact with Manfra and other students and immediately "start coming out of her shell."

"It was unfolding in front of me," Warne said. "I was getting my kid back."

For Manfra, finding a good facility was the biggest hurdle.

Facilities are an issue for many on the education frontier. Official definitions of "school" can be a challenge for smaller, harder-to-define operations. There's a hodge podge of zoning rules and building codes regulating "schools."

Facility one for the pod that became SLS was in a house. But the pod outgrew it.

Facility two was in a community rec center. But it wasn't ideal. School supplies and equipment had to be moved to and from the facility every day.

Facility three was another house. At this point, the pod had nine or 10 students. But the pod couldn't stay because the house did

not meet building codes for “educational occupancy.” Getting the pod up to code would have cost at least \$50,000, Manfra said. And there was still the possibility local officials would not approve a zoning change and building use exemption.

Facility four was in a church. But if the pod wanted to become a private school – so it could accept school choice scholarships and be accessible to more families – the church would need upgrades.

Facility five was in another community rec center. It *did* meet requirements for a private school, so SLS could now accept scholarships. But when the center got a grant to renovate, it didn’t renew the lease.

Facility six is SLS’s current home. It’s a 4,600-square-foot commercial building that once housed a day care and construction company. Manfra had to be persistent to get a building use exemption, but in the end, SLS got what it needed.

SLS’s motto is “unity in diversity.”

Half the students are students of color. Nearly all are from working-class families.

A fifth are from military families.

They are Christian, Muslim, atheist, agnostic. Manfra and her two kids are Baha’i.

School choice enabled SLS to be diverse and different.

“Without the scholarships, only one type of family would be here,” Manfra said. “School choice scholarships make it so all families can be here.”

SLS occasionally holds “diversity BBQs” for its families.

Parents and students debate hot topics. Race. Religion. Politics.

The students “need to know that someone that doesn’t believe the same as you, or look the same as you, does not make them a bad person,” Warne said.

“I want my kids to hear all sides,” continued Warne, a registered Republican. People may disagree on some issues but “we’re trying to get somewhere, together.”

Things can heat up at the BBQs. But there is mutual respect and friendship. The BBQs end in hugs.

SLS is now seeking to help other micro-schools grow – and avoid the mistakes it made.

This year, Manfra helped a former private school teacher in Tampa start her own micro-school. It’s a dual language school.

But there’s no end to the variety teachers can create, Manfra said.

“Give them their space, give them their freedom,” she said, “and they will show you what they can do.”

With education choice in the mix, the same is increasingly true for anybody with a good idea.

Manfra said if she can do it, anybody can.

“I’m not special,” she said. “There’s a lot of me’s.”

*Ron Matus is director for policy and public affairs at Step Up for Students and a former editor of redefinED, where he spearheaded the extremely important “Voucher Left” series.*

Office occupancy remains far below pre-COVID levels. Many employers have not resumed their pre-pandemic practice of expecting employees to log all work hours at a central worksite. Indeed, some companies have found it more cost-efficient to close or downsize central offices in big (and expensive) cities. “Fully remote” and “remote-optional” job listings are now increasingly common. And the number of “digital nomads” who can work and live anywhere continues to rise.<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly, people leaving major cities are increasingly moving to less densely populated areas, often to be closer to relatives. According to a 2022 United Van Lines study, eight of the nine states with the largest percentage of in-migration over the last 12 months rank in the bottom half of population density by state (Vermont, South Dakota, South Carolina, West Virginia, Alabama, Tennessee, Oregon, and Idaho). The lone exception? Florida.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, UCLA economist Michael Stoll reports that the rise in remote work is fueling “an acceleration of moves to smaller, midsized towns and cities.”<sup>27</sup> In fact, one national study found that the U.S. city with the highest percentage of net inbound migration is Ocala, Florida.<sup>28</sup> And another study found that Punta Gorda, Sarasota, and Fort Myers-Cape Coral have higher net inbound migration percentages than any of Florida’s major cities (even though Tampa, Orlando, Jacksonville, and Miami all rank among the 15 fastest-growing major cities in the country).<sup>29</sup>

Looking at national trends, scholar Brad Littlejohn of the Ethics and Public Policy Center identifies two types of workers who have swapped out “small homes in expensive, high-tax markets for larger homes in less expensive and less regulated areas:” (1) “political refugees,” who have given up on deep-blue metro areas and moved to red states; and (2) “economic refugees” – young, highly-educated “stereotypical yuppies” – who are simply searching for more affordable places to live.<sup>30</sup>

Here in Florida, a third category can be added to the mix: “education refugees” who have relocated to the Sunshine State because of K-12 policies.<sup>31</sup>

Littlejohn believes the continued rise in remote work could help “contribute to a revival of the small-town cultures that were once a key source of our nation’s moral fiber and work ethic.” He writes, “Two centuries ago, Alexis de Tocqueville observed how much these tight-knit communities contributed to the strength of

American life, and our nation has suffered deeply from the steady drain of population toward more densely-packed, but paradoxically more isolated and atomized, urban centers.”<sup>32</sup>

For small towns and rural communities to reach this potential, policymakers and education entrepreneurs will (among other things) need to address the dearth of learning options in these settings. “In many smaller communities, the absence of good K-12 schooling options is a major problem,” reports real estate professor Bart Danielsen of N.C. State University. “It not only hinders economic development and job growth, but it also adversely affects things like rural hospitals’ ability to attract and retain good doctors.”<sup>33</sup>

Danielsen says a number of household migration studies show that “families prefer to live in locations where school choice programs are offered, and they will move to these places” as circumstances allow.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps the best example of this comes from rural Vermont, where some school districts assign residents to a particular public school while other districts have a “tuitioning” policy that provides vouchers for families to use in sending children to a (private or public) school of their choice. Danielsen reports that “tuitioning districts” attract more families with school-aged children than districts with assigned schools – and that families are willing to pay more for homes in “tuitioning districts” than for homes in assigned-school districts.<sup>35</sup>

Danielsen’s research points to an often-overlooked benefit of school choice – it can help localities attract and/or retain upwardly-mobile residents that significantly contribute to the life of the community. And the long-term effects of such policies could be even more powerful if state policymakers were to make scholarship programs more flexible.

Indeed, Danielsen believes universal Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) would make it easier for small towns and rural areas to attract education-minded families because these scholarships can be used for a la carte educational services designed for individual and/or small group use. With ESAs, families can patch together courses from multiple providers (including virtual programs) rather than relying on a single school to meet all their child’s learning needs. As such, ESAs are particularly beneficial to families in geographic areas that lack schooling options.

Moreover, Danielsen believes weighted ESAs could have a similarly positive effect on many urban neighborhoods that need revitalization. Which brings us to our next topic.

## New Strategies for Stimulating “Positive Neighborhood Effects”

In recent years, Harvard scholar Raj Chetty has been conducting some very important research examining the life prospects of low-income children. Chetty has been particularly interested in identifying “positive neighborhood effects” that might help a child born into poverty move up the economic ladder. He has found that “cross-class relationships” are the strongest predictor of low-

income children’s success in escaping poverty. That is, the more that a poor child interacts regularly with economically successful neighbors (people who are above the median income, but not necessarily “rich” or “wealthy”), the greater the child’s chances of climbing the income ladder as adults.<sup>36</sup>

Chetty’s research on “economic connectedness” is consistent with (and in some ways, the flip side of) William Julius Wilson’s work on “concentrated poverty” from more than 30 years ago. Wilson observed that the civil rights gains of the 1960s made it possible for many stably employed black families to leave inner-city neighborhoods for more affluent communities newly open to them. Yet, this obviously-positive development had a downside – it meant that many minority neighborhoods lost the beneficial influence of middle-class residents like doctors, teachers, and social workers and “devolved into scenes of crime and disorder.”<sup>37</sup>

It’s easy to see how “cross-class relationships” would be helpful to the poor. Among other things, higher-income households often model good work habits and share information about educa-

tion and employment opportunities with their less plugged-in neighbors. For instance, *The New York Times* recently profiled a criminal defense lawyer who grew up in a dysfunctional household and knew nothing about the SAT until learning about the college application process from more affluent neighbors.<sup>38</sup>

Manhattan Institute scholar Kay Hymowitz says having married-couple families in the neighborhood also helps poor children in other ways. “Inter-class contact doesn’t just give the poor ‘role models,’ it expands people’s understandings of possible life scripts and gives them a tangible vision of a better future, including a stable family life,” she writes.<sup>39</sup>

So, what is hindering a greater married-couple presence in many inner-city neighborhoods? Danielsen says assigned public schools are a significant factor. “Assigned public schools influence where families choose to live,” he writes. “Poorly performing schools repel families and result in a concentration of poverty in

■ Remote work could help “contribute to a revival of the small-town cultures that were once a key source of our nation’s moral fiber and work ethic.”

■ School choice can help localities attract upwardly-mobile families that significantly contribute to the life of the community.

# Building Stronger Bonds

## WILLIAM MATTOX

When Harold and Talethia Edwards bought a house in Tallahassee's Bond Community more than a dozen years ago, they figured it would just be a starter home. Then, the Great Recession hit, setting back their financial plans (but not their quest to start a family). And along the way, Harold and Talethia grew to deeply love their neighbors and to appreciate the special place their family occupies in the Bond community.

For Talethia, a pivotal moment came when she attended a city government meeting on sustainability. The presentation focused on "green" ideas that every household and neighborhood ought to adopt. Yet, as Talethia pondered the word "sustainability" in relation to her neighborhood, her mind went elsewhere. "For our community to see any *sustainable* improvement," she thought, "we will need more households like mine to come in and fill the abandoned houses and empty lots."

Now, when Talethia says "households like mine," she isn't claiming to be anything special. Or trying to put her family on a pedestal.

But others might do so.

In fact, several years ago, a new mom in their community was so overwhelmed by the task of caring for her child alone that she literally left the baby on the Edwards' doorstep with a request that they raise it.



Which meant that the Edwards family just got bigger!

One of the reasons Harold and Talethia have remained in the Bond neighborhood is because schooling considerations did not force them out. The Edwards highly value education and have made extensive use of school choice options – enrolling their very-accomplished children in various private, charter, and specialty programs depending on their particular needs. For example, their 15 year-old daughter has already completed all of her high school requirements and is taking dual enrollment courses at Florida A & M University. And their 13 year-old son (who tested 159 on an IQ test) now attends a magnet school for creative thinkers.

Importantly, Talethia sees no conflict between her school choice advocacy and Harold's position as a high school teacher in a Title I public school. "We care deeply about the quality of our local public schools," Talethia says. "We just want parents to have the freedom to do what is best for each child."

Talethia believes offering flexible scholarships (ESAs) would give families like hers more learning options. And she believes weighting scholarships for those living in Title I neighborhoods would help the Bond community attract more intact, middle-income households. "Bond used to be a place where many married couples lived," she says. "I'd like to see it become that again."

neighborhoods assigned to those schools."<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, Danielsén says some charter school programs in disadvantaged neighborhoods do not affect neighborhood composition significantly. These schools may do a very good job of meeting the needs of at-risk students, but they often are not designed to have the course offerings needed by advanced students. As such, Danielsén says these schools (and their surrounding neighborhoods) often fail to attract or retain students coming from families that place a high priority on academic achievement. Instead, education-minded families frequently choose to live in neighbor-

hoods farther away from their work site.

Given these common patterns, Danielsén believes policymakers ought to learn a lesson from Paris, France, where an extensive school voucher program has had a dramatic effect on family residential patterns in areas with poorly performing public schools. "In neighborhoods that cannot participate in the voucher program, bad school assignments drag down housing values," Danielsén reports. "In neighborhoods where the voucher program is easily accessible, bad school assignments have no [adverse] impact on housing values because families know they can exercise the op-

tion to use a voucher.”<sup>41</sup>

Danielsen says the Paris example (and several other family migration studies<sup>42</sup>) demonstrate that school choice can help low-income neighborhoods by freeing people to make housing decisions irrespective of local school assignments. When education-minded families enjoy access to school choice scholarships, they are less likely to move away and more likely to put down roots in their existing neighborhood. (See sidebar on the Edwards family in Tallahassee for one very compelling example of this.)

Accordingly, Danielsen believes policymakers should prioritize school choice scholarships to all families living in lower-income neighborhoods, including married-couple households

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with incomes above the median. “School choice programs can improve neighborhoods and spark economic vitality,” he writes. And when universal scholarships are available to all families everywhere, Danielsen says “enhanced benefits” should be offered to families living in lower-income neighborhoods needing revitalization.<sup>43</sup>

Weighted scholarships of this kind could be provided easily by transforming the federal government’s Title I education assistance program into one that funds students rather than school systems. And it would be fitting for weighted funds to come from the Title I program since many of the low-income

neighborhoods we see today were adversely affected by the federal government’s “redlining” policies from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century – and then adversely affected by the assigned-school policies of their public school system.

Weighted ESAs for families living in Title I neighborhoods would also account for the fact that lower-income areas often face greater obstacles in attracting new education establishments. Indeed, a recent study of Kansas City families found that those living in less-affluent neighborhoods typically had fewer accessible school choice options than those living in more affluent areas.<sup>44</sup>

## Making the Policy Adjustments

A New A+ Plan for Florida Education should offer universal ESAs for all students (that’s the A) with weighted funding for special populations, including all families living in Title I neighborhoods (that’s the Plus). What is the least costly – and least disruptive – path to accomplish this? Here is a four-step outline that policymakers might find helpful:

1. **Leave the Family Empowerment Scholarship as is.** Encourage current voucher recipients who are happy with their schools to continue to use the FES. The fewer the FES families that switch to the new ESA program, the lower the churn in the marketplace and the less potential for scholarship fraud or abuse.
2. **Convert the Hope Scholarship to a universal ESA with a basic scholarship amount equal to funding for full-time virtual students.** Hope has no income test and far fewer recipients than other scholarship programs – two factors that make it a good instrument for establishing a new universal ESA. Setting the basic ESA scholarship amount below that for the Family Empowerment Scholarship can be justified since ESAs are more cost-efficient (much like virtual education). This also lessens the initial financial impact of universal ESAs and further discourages market churn. Of course, funding parity between populations could always be adopted in the future if the Legislature wants to share cost savings with ESA users rather than Florida taxpayers.
3. **Authorize weighted funding (above the basic ESA amount) for special populations.** Current Hope Scholarship recipients (victims of bullying, etc.) would need to receive at least as much as they do currently – which is equal to what public school students receive. Treating families in Title I neighborhoods similarly would create a way for those unhappy with vouchers to get ESAs. More importantly, it would give education-minded families of any means an incentive to live in and help revitalize Title I neighborhoods. Although it may seem like a subtle difference, weighted funding for all families living in a lower-income neighborhood is far better than weighted funding for lower-income families because it avoids “marriage penalties” and it frees upwardly mobile families from feeling like they have to move to a “better school district” (as has been the pattern historically).



4. **Adopt a “trigger” provision related to Title I funding to help spur federal action.** If the Legislature so wanted, it could authorize weighted funding for those in Title I neighborhoods but make this “bonus” amount conditional upon federal action (once Congress authorizes states to use Title I monies for weighted scholarships). In addition to minimizing new state appropriations, this “trigger” provision would allow Florida leaders to ask, “Why are the folks in Washington denying opportunities to poor kids by insisting that we use Title I monies to fund systems rather than allowing us to fund students directly, as authorized in our New A+ Plan?” As such, this “trigger” provision might help spur federal reform of the Title I program – which would benefit students in other states beyond Florida. Moreover, ideally, the federal legislation would be named the Mary McLeod Bethune Title I Transformation Act to honor Florida’s most legendary educator – and to call attention to the fact that students who attend private K-12 schools like the one Bethune founded currently receive no Title I assistance but would be eligible for weighted funding under Florida’s New A+ Plan.

## Conclusion

More than two decades ago, Florida’s original A+ Plan for Education started our state down the school choice path. A New A+ Plan for Florida Education would enable us to reach our destination – providing scholarship eligibility to all students, while retaining our state’s special concern for families facing difficult circumstances.

Adopting a New A+ Plan for Florida Education would extend the reach of education choice to many rural and small-town families who have yet to benefit, and it would help spur the much-needed transformation of many urban neighborhoods that have suffered under restrictive government policies. It would also lay to rest any dispute about which state truly represents the “gold standard” in K-12 education, for while Arizona and West Virginia clearly deserve an “A” for their recent adoption of universal ESAs, only Florida would have an “A+” policy that also provides weighted funding for those living in Title I neighborhoods.

Most of all, a New A+ Plan for Florida Education would reaffirm the right of parents to direct the education and upbringing of their own children. It would acknowledge that no one is more likely to love a child – or to represent a child’s best interests – than a child’s parents.

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## Endnotes

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