

Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

In the mid 1990's the state of Florida began a journey that would change the very definition of public education in our state. Up until that time, the definition of public education was very simple: we raised taxpayer dollars to educate students, we gave every penny of those funds to the public school districts, and the districts ran all the schools in a fairly uniform manner. Then they assigned students to those schools by their zip codes. That was public education in Florida. That remains the definition in many states today.

But is that the best definition for today? Think of the Miami Dade school district. It has over 350,000 students. Over 150 languages are spoken in district schools. And if you drive from Overtown to Coral Gables, you will see great economic diversity as well. Is a top down, uniform system of schools where kids are assigned by their zip codes the model that will produce the best outcomes?

Fortunately, over the last 30 years, Florida has been moving towards a new definition of public education: Raise taxpayer dollars to educate students, but then empower families to choose different providers, and even different delivery methods, that best suit their children's individual learning needs.

Florida has now fully embraced this new definition. We now have roughly three million K12 students whose educations are funded by the taxpayers. Now over fifty percent of those students do not attend their zoned public schools. In the Miami Dade district, that figure is over seventy percent. Miami Dade is the freest market for K12 education in the country.

What is most encouraging to me is that the largest category of choice in Florida are district run schools of choice—either magnet schools or open enrollment. Our school districts have responded to competition by creating options that families want. We also have one of the most robust charter school markets, and we lead the country in online learning as well.

Once again Miami Dade led the way. In 2008 Alberto Carvalho took over as superintendent. He did not complain about education choice—rather, he said “Choice is a wave, and we’re going to ride it.” Miami Dade now has over 100 magnet schools, many of which are recognized as some of the best schools in the country. It also has over 150 charter schools. But it has over 400 private schools serving students on taxpayer funded scholarships.

Florida has made the full transition to this new definition of public education. Now in our state, every single student can—if they want—receive an education savings account funded by the taxpayers. They can use this account for private school tuition, but also for other approved educational goods and services. Florida now has over a half million students using ESAs every year. Roughly 150,000 of those students do not attend a school

full time. Their parents are customizing their learning experience by purchasing a variety of educational services from different providers.

As ESAs have grown in Florida, our state has become a hot bed of creativity for providers of educational services. Because parents can disaggregate their funds and aren't required to spend it all on tuition at one school, we are seeing hundreds of innovative education service providers. Just one example: a small business started by a marine biologist that is now teaching 200 home schoolers science lessons out in the wild.

This new definition is also creating opportunities for educators. Over the last two decades we have seen hundreds of public school educators start their own schools, particularly in low-income areas. They can do so because now even poor parents can bring with them significant spending power from the scholarships.

Another encouraging development: school districts are realizing that they have classes and services that scholarship families want to purchase. In the last year, 47 of the 67 public school districts in Florida have come on to Step Up's online marketplace to offer classes and services to scholarship families.

One of the most critical developments in Florida's journey to this new definition was the creation of our tax credit scholarship program in 2001. This program worked identically to the new Federal tax credit passed last year, except corporations received the tax credit rather than individuals. This program was critical in bringing education choice to Florida's poorest families. As it steadily grew over the years, it demonstrated how highly families valued this empowerment. When a lawsuit threatened to shut down the program in 2013, over 10,000 people came to our distant capital of Tallahassee to show their support.

I believe the new Federal tax credit scholarship provision will be a great benefit to all students, regardless of where they go to school. Students in district and charter schools will be eligible for these ESAs, which can be used for essential enrichment activities. Hopefully this program will help other states begin or speed up their own journeys from the old definition of public education to the new.

Thank you.