

[<<Back to Florida Education News](#)

**Florida Education News
June 2008
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IN THIS ISSUE:

[The Effect of Special Education Vouchers on Public School Achievement: Evidence From Florida's McKay Scholarship Program](#)

[School District in Florida Recommits to Providing Educators and Students Proven Digital Classroom Resource](#)

The Effect of Special Education Vouchers on Public School Achievement: Evidence From Florida's McKay Scholarship Program

This paper evaluates the impact of exposure to a voucher program for disabled students in Florida on the academic performance of disabled students who remain in the public school system. The authors utilize student-level data on the universe of public school students in the state of Florida from 2000-01 through 2004-05 to study the effect of the largest school voucher program in the United States, the McKay Scholarship Program for Students with Disabilities (McKay), on achievement in math and reading by students who have been diagnosed as disabled and remain in the public school system.

This paper is the first empirical evaluation of the impact of exposure to a voucher program designed to allow students with disabilities to enroll in schools other than their local public schools on the achievement of disabled students who remain in their local public schools. Vouchers for disabled students are the fastest-growing type in the United States. Programs similar to McKay are currently operating in Ohio, Georgia, and Utah and have been recently considered by other states.

Highlights of the study include:

- Public school students with relatively mild disabilities made statistically

significant test score improvements in both math and reading as more nearby private schools began participation in the McKay program. That is, contrary to the hypothesis that school choice harms students who remain in public schools, this study finds that students eligible for vouchers who remained in the public schools made greater academic improvements as their school choices increased.

- Disabled public school students' largest gains as exposure to McKay increased were made by those diagnosed as having the mildest learning disabilities. The largest category of students enjoying the greatest gains, known as Specific Learning Disability, accounts for 61.2% of disabled students and 8.5% of all students in Florida.
- The academic proficiency of students diagnosed with relatively severe disabilities was neither helped nor harmed by increased exposure to the McKay program.

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Full paper:

http://www.manhattan-institute.org/pdf/cr_52.pdf

School District in Florida Recommits to Providing Educators and Students Proven Digital Classroom Resource

Polk County Public Schools in Florida recently renewed its district-wide agreement with Discovery Education to offer Discovery Education *streaming*.

"Polk County Public Schools is a district with more than 90,000 students and 100 school sites," explained Polk County Public Schools Technology Resource Specialist/Trainer, George Lussier. "As the district works to place mounted projectors in more than 4,000 classrooms, teachers have rapidly integrated Discovery Education *streaming* content into curriculum maps and lesson plans. Great professional development, great content and ease-of-use have made this product a winner for Polk's students."

Broward County

Located on the southeast coast of Florida and containing the city of Fort Lauderdale, Broward County is among the largest counties in population in the U.S. The school district, which is coterminous with the county, has the second largest student enrollment in the state and the sixth in the nation although enrollment has decreased in recent years. Broward County's economy is diversified, with services, government and trade sectors

accounting for the largest components of the employment base. As in many areas, the unemployment rate has increased over recent months, to 4% in February 2008 from 3.2% a year earlier, although it remains below state and national rates of 4.5% and 4.8%, respectively. Even though population continues to increase at a healthy pace, growth has slowed somewhat as the county approaches build-out, with population increasing 9.2% since the last census.

The county experienced strong growth in property values in previous years with assessed value increasing 15.1% in fiscal 2006 and 18.8% in fiscal 2007. While the growth remained strong for fiscal 2008 at 11.6%, the state's estimated property values for the county are up only 1% for fiscal 2009 due to the national and concentrated regional slowdown in the housing market. While market value is expected to decline in the coming years, Fitch believes that the provisions of the Save Our Homes legislation afford the district a substantial cushion to withstand market value declines. The county has also experienced declines in housing starts as well as an increase in foreclosure and delinquency rates in the past year.

The district's financial position has eroded recently with three consecutive years of operating deficits which were largely due to a combination of reductions in state funding and larger than budgeted enrollment declines. Enrollment projections have since been modified; the fiscal 2008 actual decline of 0.7% was close to anticipated. The district projects enrollment to continue to decline by approximately 1.3% total between the current year and fiscal 2011. A surplus of approximately \$20 million is currently projected for fiscal 2008 due mainly to the larger than budgeted enrollment and an effective expenditure reduction plan which was implemented to counteract mid-year state aid reductions.

The district's unreserved fund balance at the end of fiscal 2007 was 4.4% of spending, above the district's fund balance policy floor of 3%. Based on year-to-date results, unreserved fund balance levels at the end of fiscal 2008 will increase to approximately 5%. Fund balance levels are monitored monthly by the district, and the superintendent and school board are notified immediately if total fund balance levels dip below 3.5%.

Overall debt levels are low at \$1,537 per capita and 1.15% of taxable market value. Amortization of outstanding and proposed debt is average with 50.0% of principal being retired in 10 years. The district's current five-year capital improvement plan (CIP) through fiscal 2012 totals \$2.4 billion (net of debt service payments). With the recent declines in enrollment, the concentration in capital projects is moving away from construction of new buildings and capacity additions to facilities' improvements. The CIP is fully funded with approximately 56% of funding derived from the 2-mill capital outlay levy. An additional 38% of the plan is funded with the current and future COP proceeds while the remainder of the plan is supported by state funding and

impact fees. Impact fee revenues have declined rapidly in recent years but are not currently expected to affect the CIP.

Sarasota County School Board

Located on the southwestern coast of Florida, Sarasota County's (the county) economy expanded rapidly in the first part of the decade. The county's employment base grew by 19.7% from 2000-2006 while per capita personal income increased to a high 143.7% of the state and national levels. However, recent data indicate a downturn. In 2007, the employment base contracted by 1% while the unemployment rate rose above the state level for the first time in several years. The March 2008 unemployment rate climbed to 5.5% versus a low 3.4% a year earlier. Area housing data show a slowing number of starts and a sharp decline in prices; officials expect a modest decline in fiscal 2009 taxable assessed value (TAV). Fitch notes that the district's revenue base is weighted heavily toward local sources. While this softens the impact of recent state funding reductions, it makes the district more vulnerable to weak local conditions. A decline in TAV has implications for the district's voted operating and capital outlay levies, although well above-average general fund balance levels provide some relief.

Fiscal 2008 is expected to end with an approximately \$7.5 million general fund deficit stemming from an unbudgeted increase in teacher salaries and a series of state funding cuts. However, the fiscal 2007 surplus brought the unreserved general fund balance to 13.6% of expenditures, transfers out, and other uses, well above-average for a Florida school district that Fitch rates and comfortably above the district's own fund balance policy. In March 2006, county voters approved the extension a one-mill operating property tax levy for fiscal years 2007-2010, which provides excess revenues for education funding.

Debt levels are low, with overall debt equaling \$1,354 per capita and 0.8% of TAV. Excluding overlapping debt of the county and underlying municipalities, debt ratios fall to \$472 per capita and 0.3% of TAV. The district's fiscal 2009-2013 capital improvement plan (CIP) totals \$1.2 billion, including approximately \$821 million of capital appropriations. COPs proceeds provide just 20% of CIP funding sources, which coupled with a rapid amortization rate should keep debt ratios low. While the district's capital outlay receipts will be affected by the Florida's Legislature's fiscal 2009 reduction of the maximum allowable capital outlay millage, the passage of Amendment One, and the ongoing housing market correction, district officials note some flexibility in delaying capital projects. Slowing enrollment growth compliments this trend. The district does not plan to prefund its modest \$9.2 million other post-employment benefits liability through the use of a trust.

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