

OPINION

## In South Florida, Parents Are Building Their Children's Education a la Carte

**Matus:** Using universal ESAs, families are cobbling together learning lineups from microschools, outside experts, even classes at local public schools.

Twelve years ago, Christa Jewett left her job as an environmental consultant in South Florida to start a venture that spoke to her heart: offering immersive, hands-on marine science lessons to students of all ages, using local and state parks along the Atlantic Ocean as real-life classrooms.

For years, Jewett had to work side jobs because her passion project couldn't pay the bills. Then, in 2020, COVID happened; suddenly, a flood of families wanted something other than traditional schools. Now, Saltwater Studies is serving 200 students a month, triple the number from 2020, and Jewett recently hired another teacher to keep up with demand.

She isn't alone.

South Florida has dozens of fresh a la carte providers like Saltwater Studies, operations that focus on a single subject or specialized niche, from core academics to coding, cooking and composting. Former public school teachers and talented career switchers like Jewett are among those creating them. And as I note in a new report, they're attracting thousands of students. Many of them are homeschooled or attending microschools — and many of them are among the nearly 400,000 students using Florida's education savings accounts, the largest publicly funded education choice programs in America.

What's happening in South Florida offers a glimpse into the future of public education.

As more states embrace not just school choice, but education choice, more and more families will have the power and flexibility to cobble together exactly the programming they want for their children. Call it unbundling.

Call it a la carte learning. Call it whatever you want. In pace-setting choice states like Florida, thousands of resourceful parents are already making it happen with state support. And providers like Saltwater Studies are emerging in response.

After Florida created its first ESA in 2014 for students with special needs, families quietly began demonstrating what's possible when you can pick and choose from tutors, therapists and an ever-growing array of other programs and providers. Parents from all walks of life (like this former

public school teacher from the little town of LaBelle) began putting together sophisticated learning lineups for their kids.

Researchers call them customizers. In five years, the number of students in Florida whose parents used ESAs to access at least one option outside of a full-time school quadrupled, from just over 7,000 in 2018 to nearly 29,000 in 2023.

Now, with Florida adopting universal choice, the number of parents joining those pioneers is poised to accelerate. South Florida — and Broward County in particular — is ahead of the curve.

Broward is the teeming county just north of Miami-Dade. It's home to the sixth-biggest school district in America. Over the past five years, no big urban district in Florida has seen a bigger jump in homeschoolers. Last year, nearly 10,000 called Broward home. That's a lot of families who want a customized education.

New providers are emerging to meet that demand — and, in some cases, the parents themselves are becoming entrepreneurs. For example, Toni and Uli Frallicciardi started Surf Skate Science in 2018, not long after they became homeschool parents. Both have backgrounds in science and



engineering, so they began doing lessons in those subjects at South Florida beaches and skate parks. Their approach got traction in a hurry. They had five students in year one. Now they have 500 — and another 2,000 a year going on field trips they organize.

This is not either/or, with ESA parents and a la carte providers on one side and traditional schools on the other. Some parents are already using ESAs to purchase individual classes at private and public schools. And the same law that made choice universal in Florida also made it explicit that part-time enrollment is allowed in Florida public schools. Those schools offer a huge menu of course choices — and now they can make those options available to families using state-supported scholarships

Of course, many parents will continue to want the whole package of a specific school, and those choices have grown as

well.

Florida has been expanding charter schools and private school choice for a quarter-century. The evidence suggests the students enrolled in those options are outpacing their counterparts in traditional schools, and the competitive effects of choice are spurring rising achievement in public schools. In fact, public school districts are the biggest engines for choice in Florida right now, having responded to charters and vouchers by rolling out hundreds of magnet schools, career academies and other, high-quality options.

If school choice was the first wave, unleashing a rising tide of more and better schools, education choice is the next wave. As more parents start to surf it, it will be fascinating to see what kinds of providers emerge — and how districts respond.



**Ron Matus** is director of policy and public affairs at Step Up For Students, a nonprofit that administers Florida's choice scholarship programs.

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