

# FLORIDA CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

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MICHAEL B. SHEEDY  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



June 24, 2020

The Honorable Ron DeSantis  
Governor  
400 S. Monroe Street  
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0001

***Re: Please protect school choice funding – line items 88 (VPK), 111 (Gardiner) and the robust new growth rate set for FES scholarships***

Dear Governor DeSantis:

It is no secret that Florida leads the way among other states in promoting school choice. This movement continues moving forward due in no small part to your leadership as Governor. On behalf of the many families served by scholarships, we are very grateful. In light of considerable fiscal impacts due to COVID-19, we ask that you preserve the following school choice priorities in the State's annual budget:

- The one-percent-growth rate for the Family Empowerment Scholarship (FES) Program;
- The \$49 per-child boost in Voluntary Prekindergarten Program (VPK) Scholarships; and,
- The \$42 million overall funding boost for the Gardiner Scholarship Program.

Regarding the FES Program, House Bill 7067 increased the annual growth rate to one percent of total public school enrollment. This boost is up from the 0.25 percent threshold or 7,000 new students allowed per year when the program was first established in 2019. The new one percent threshold means that as many as 48,000 students statewide can be served by this innovative program in the fall. This includes at least some new families who may have suffered income loss due to the pandemic.

For VPK, the Legislature has authorized the first modest increase to the Base Student Allocation since 2014. This two percent increase after years of program cuts or level funding will help many early learning providers of high quality to continue offering VPK next year.

For Gardiner, the Legislature has authorized a \$42 million increase in overall funding to bring the total program allocation to more than \$189 million. This represents a much needed 28 percent increase in light of the waiting list that had built up to 3,500 students for the 2020-2021 school year.

The need to preserve school choice funds is made clearer than ever when you consider the impact of the last recession on parental empowerment in education. There were a significant number of nonpublic school closures or conversions during the next several years after the Great Recession occurred. We thus ask for you to please approve Florida's 2020-21 budget with school choice priorities kept intact.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael B. Sheedy". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Michael B. Sheedy

cc: Most Rev. Gerald Barbarito, Bishop of Palm Beach & Episcopal Moderator for Education