Florida leads nation in college affordability and on-time graduation

A roundup of Florida education news from around the state



A year after graduation, Florida's state university bachelor's degree holders earn an average of nearly $56,000, with UF and Florida Poly grads leading the pack, neck and neck at the top. [UF]

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The big story: Florida is one of two states leading the nation in college affordability, according to a new report released today.

The state also ties Vermont for second in the nation in on-time completion, at 60%, according to the State Opportunity Index by Strada Education Foundation, a national non-profit based in Indiana.

“Florida has always stood out for affordability,” said Nichole Torpey-Saboe, vice president of research at the foundation. “For on-time completion as well, Florida is really, really strong. A lot of states struggle in getting their graduates through in four years, and Florida is comparatively good at that.”

The index, now in its third year, gathers data from all 50 states and Washington, D.C., to research the college-to-career pipeline. The research looked into five areas: clear outcomes, quality coaching, affordability, employer alignment and work-based learning. In each area, states are ranked as leading, advanced, developing or foundational.

“This looks at what colleges and universities in your state are doing to make sure that a college degree is worth it,” Torpey-Saboe said.

Each year of the index, Florida’s college landscape’s affordability has ranked in the “leading” category.

While Florida has strengths, there is room for improvement like any other state, said Torpey-Saboe. The state does not collect information on information on things like pay rate, work location or occupation post-graduation.

Quality coaching, work-based learning and employer enlightenment ranked in the “developing” category, described as being at their early stages of improvement.

“I think Florida could really improve when it comes to providing more career guidance and awareness of where these different pathways lead, and then providing students with opportunities to get experience before they graduate,” Torpey-Saboe said.

The amount of bachelor’s degree recipients in Florida who are now employed with college-level degrees is 5% less than the national average, according to the report. Finance and healthcare technician jobs are the hardest to place, according to the index’s research.

Students in associate’s programs participate in paid work-based experiences at higher rates than the nation, though bachelor’s program participants dip slightly below the nation on average.

“I think every state or most states really have room to improve because I think all students really benefit from having that experience before they graduate,” Torpey-Saboe said.

Hot topics



The exterior of Plato Academy in Clearwater. The group's Trinity charter school is challenging the Pasco school district's property tax revenue sharing model. [CHRIS URSO | Times]

Charter schools: A group of Pasco County charter schools filed a formal complaint against the school district over property tax revenue sharing.

College admission: Getting accepted to the University of South Florida is becoming more competitive as demand increases, WUSF reports.

Leadership: A revamped Orange County school board faces a variety of challenges as it takes over, Central Florida Public Media reports.

Public comment: Angry Duval County residents packed the school board meeting Tuesday to talk about board member Tony Ricardo's sharing of an anti-Islamic post on social media, WJXT reports.

Religion on campus: Hillel of Broward and Palm Beach has expanded its presence on the Florida Atlantic University campus, the Sun-Sentinel reports.

School closures: Plans to redevelop a Jacksonville community, including a new Jaguars stadium, may cause the Duval County school district to pause the closure of a school in the area, the Florida Times-Union reports. “The Historic Eastside could have a lot of investment going into it. … We didn’t understand that,” Deputy Superintendent Corey Wright said.

School safety: Martin County schools beefed up security after an alleged TikTok threat against a local elementary school, TC Palm reports.

Superintendents: The Brevard County school board will hold a special session to work out the details of superintendent Mark Rendell’s exit, Florida Today reports.

From the police blotter … A Palm Beach County school district employee was arrested on accusations of sending sexually explicit messages to a person he believed to be a minor, the Sun-Sentinel reports. • A Hillsborough County teen was arrested on accusations of bringing a gun to school, the Herald-Tribune reports.

Hot takes



New research from indicates the type of pre-kindergarten program a child attends has long-term implications. [AMANDA MCCOY | TNS]

“Choosing a preschool is a difficult and important decision. Parents weigh cost, proximity and convenience against how each program meets their child’s needs and aligns with their family’s goals and cultural values. This choice makes a difference.” — Researchers **Charles Bleiker**, **Adam Winsler** and **Kaitlyn Mumma**, on types of pre-k programs (Tampa Bay Times)

“The first challenge is identifying which technology is covered. The rule’s broad definition of an AI system should not be confused with its narrower definition of an AI instructional tool.” — **Leonard Dietzen**, RumbergerKirk education law partner, on Florida’s new rules for AI in schools (District Administration)

“Public school teachers, charter schools, private schools, homeschool families and entrepreneurial educators are not on opposing teams. They are participants in a public education system whose shared purpose is to serve all students well.” — **Doug Tuthill**, Pioneer Institute distinguished senior fellow in education, on school choice (Tampa Bay Times)

Quick quiz



Bear Creek Elementary School in St. Petersburg is slated to close its doors at the end of the 2026-27 academic year. [DIRK SHADD | Times]

Researchers have found closing schools does not necessarily generate savings sought. What gets in the way?

a) Busing costs associated with taking children to schools farther from home

b) Severance pay for laid off employees

c) Security and upkeep of closed facilities

d) All of the above

Find the answer in this story from Associated Press.

Don't miss a story. Here's a link to yesterday's roundup.

The Tampa Bay Times Education Hub reports on Florida's schools and universities and the students they serve. You can contribute to the hub through our journalism fund by clicking here.