



**Evaluation of the Family Empowerment Scholarship for
Educational Options Program
Participation, Compliance and Test Scores in 2020-21**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report details the 2020-21 academic year evaluation for the Family Empowerment Scholarship (FES) Program, as required by the 2021 Florida Statutes, s. 1002.394 (9)(c). The Learning Systems Institute is the organization responsible for conducting the first evaluation of the FES program. This report provides a summary of key findings, details about test score collection, 2020-21 test score results of program participants, and attributes of new program participants in 2020-21.

This report does not compare the performance of FES students to public school students. Due to the difference in the tests that each group takes, such a comparison may not be valid.

LSI was designated as the independent research organization and was directed to conduct the annual evaluation of the Family Empowerment Scholarship Program. This report presents data collected by LSI for students participating in the 2020-21 academic year. The main findings include:

Participating private school compliance with protocol:

- Compliance with program testing requirements was high in 2020-21. Participating private schools reported test scores for 89.4 percent of program participants in grades 3-10.

Differential program participation rates for different groups of students and families:

- Newly participating FES students in 2020-21 were more likely to be black, and less likely to be Hispanic than non-participant eligible students. Participating FES students were also slightly more likely to be white than were eligible non-participant students. Furthermore, FES students in 2020-21 were less likely to be English-language learners than were non-participants. The share of FES students who were free-lunch eligible was slightly lower than the share of free-lunch eligible, non-participant students. Lastly, compared to eligible non-participant students, FES students had poorer test performance both in English Language Arts (ELA) and math before entering the FES Program and they tended to come from lower-performing public schools.

Test scores of program participants, 2020-21:

- FES students scored at the 45.8th normal curve equivalent in reading and the 41.9th normal curve equivalent in math.

1. BACKGROUND

This report details the 2020-21 academic year evaluation results of the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Educational Options (FES) program, as required by the 2021 Florida Statutes, s. 1002.394 (9)(c). This report is the first to evaluate the FES program. This evaluation is conducted by the Florida State University Learning Systems Institute (LSI).

This report provides a summary of key findings, details about test score collection, 2020-21 test score results of program participants, and attributes of new program participants in 2020-21. This report does not compare the performance of FES students to public school students. Due to the difference in the tests that each group takes, such a comparison may not be valid. While FES students take a nationally norm-referenced test, public school students take the Florida Standards Assessments (FSA) Test. Because there is no correspondence between the FSA and the nationally norm-referenced tests that FES students take, the independent research organization tasked with this evaluation, LSI, holds that it is not valid to make these comparisons.

Pursuant to the 2021 Florida Statutes, s. 1002.395(9)(f) that require an independent evaluation of the FES Program, LSI has been tasked with conducting an annual evaluation of the FES program beginning with the academic year 2020-21. This report provides the results of the 2020-21 academic year evaluation of the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Educational Options Program.

2. TEST SCORE COLLECTION IN 2020-21

Data collection protocol

As mandated by the 2021 Florida Statutes, s. 1002.394(9)(c)(1), participating private schools administered a nationally norm-referenced test approved by the Florida Department of Education. The state designates an approved list of tests from which to choose: the ACT Aspire, Basic Achievement Skills Inventory, Comprehensive Testing Program, Curriculum Associates i-Ready Assessments, Educational Development Series, Iowa Assessments, Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, Iowa Tests of Educational Development, Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement, NWEA Measures of Academic Progress, Pivot INSPECT Summative Assessment, PSAT/NMSQT, Scantron Performance Series, Stanford Achievement Test, STAR (Math Enterprise, Reading Enterprise), TerraNova, or Wide Range Achievement Test. Alternatively, participating students may be administered the FSA in accordance with 1002.394(9)(c)(2).

Data collection took place during the year 2020-21, in which private schools sent students' test scores to LSI. The 1,385 private schools that had participating FES students in grades 3 through 10 during the 2020-21 school year were contacted by LSI in fall 2020, spring 2021 and again throughout spring and summer 2021 to encourage compliance with score reporting. Schools were provided a roster of participating FES students in grades 3 to 10, which was obtained in late fall 2020 from the Florida Department of Education (FDOE). From the private schools with participating FES students, 11,710 students were enrolled in grades 3 to 10, the grades mandated for testing per the 2021 Florida Statutes, s. 1002.394 (9)(c)(1). If schools had any missing or invalid student scores, they were instructed to provide an explanation backed by

evidence, most commonly in the form of a notarized letter, for each missing or invalid student score.

Participating private school compliance with protocol

Score reporting in 2020-21

Most schools were in compliance with test score reporting for the academic year 2020-21. Regarding test score submission, most schools sent photocopied test score sheets that had been scored by the testing company. In a small number of cases where tests had been hand-scored, schools were instructed to send detailed test administration and scoring procedures. Throughout the spring and summer of 2021, LSI followed up with schools that had sent invalid test score results, including missing or incomplete test scores.

Test score sheets were sent to LSI via a secure, online score portal. As test score data was received, two data entry staff members recorded students' test scores and test information. The scores were then reconciled with the original scores to ensure the highest accuracy. Test scores are deleted following one year after this double-entry and reconciliation procedure to ensure student privacy as mandated by s. 1002.22(2)(d) of the Florida Statutes.

To obtain information about prior public schooling records, the electronic database of FES students from the FDOE was sent to the Education Data Warehouse (EDW) at the FDOE using its secure file share system. FES student records were matched to FDOE records in order to include information about students' FSA scores,

public schooling history, free/reduced lunch status, limited English proficiency, and disability status. A unique FDOE identification number replaced students' identifying information. The FDOE then returned via secure file share the matched and comparison data that were de-identified and stripped of any personal information. These de-identified data were then used for analysis.

There were 1,385 FES participating schools with students in the relevant grades in 2020-21. The majority of the FES participating schools provided evidence of test administration consistent with the specifications of the program. Thirty-seven participating schools, serving 207 testing-eligible students, closed or did not report scores for any participating students.¹ There were 11,710 students in relevant grades participating in the FES Program in 2020-21. Valid, legible test scores were received for 10,466 FES students, which represents 89.4 percent of all expected test scores received.

Table 1: Distribution of score reporting percentages: 2020-21

	Percentage
Legible, valid scores received	89.4
Not enrolled at time of testing	1.2
Ineligible for testing	0.7
School closed/suspended	1.8
Student sick/absent	2.9
Missing/unusable test score	4.0
Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.	

¹ LSI reported these non-compliant schools to the Florida Department of Education.

The rate of legible, valid scores received was high in 2020-21. As seen in Table 1, private schools reported test scores for 89.4 percent of program participants in grades 3-10. Because 2020-21 was the first year that schools were required to submit scores for FES students, we anticipate a larger percentage of schools submitting scores in subsequent years.

Table 2: Percent and number of students with legible, valid scores: 2020-21.

Number of students	Number of students with legible, valid scores	Percent of students with legible, valid scores
11,710	10,466	89.4

In 2020-21 the number of students in relevant grades participating in the program was 11,710. As can be seen in Table 2, the percentage of students with legible, valid scores was 89.4.

Comparison of students with legible, valid test scores to scholarship population

Although the rate of successful score reporting was high in 2020-21 at 89.4 percent, there were 10.6 percent of students whose expected scores were not received. Thus, it was still important to examine whether the students whose test scores were successfully reported are comparable to the population enrolled in 2020-21.

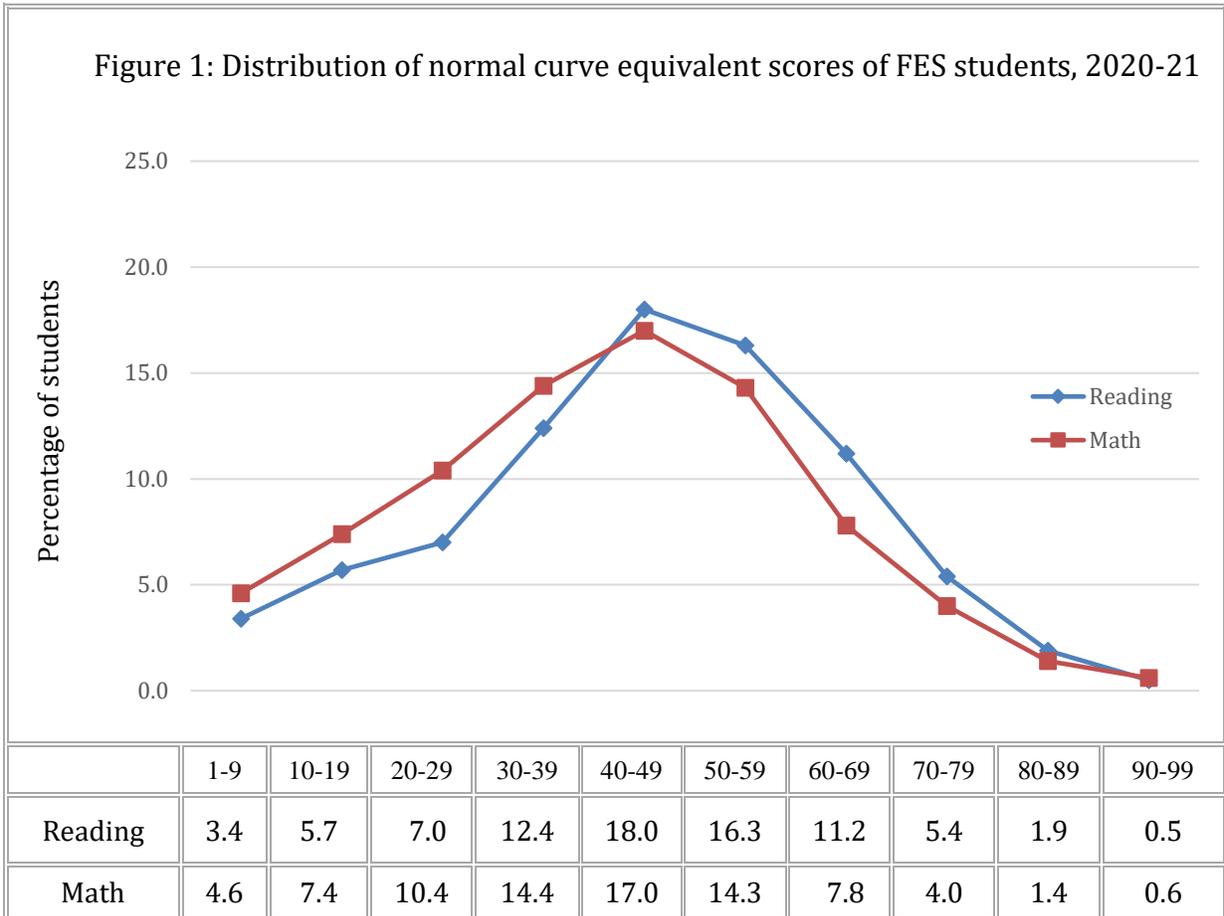
For this analysis, we used demographic data provided by the FDOE, which included race and gender. We found differences between students whose test scores were successfully reported and those whose scores were not successfully reported in terms of their gender and race. Students whose scores were successfully reported were more likely to be white (54.8 percent) and female (49.4 percent), compared to students

with no test scores (38.2 percent white and 46.0 percent female). We cannot make any claims about whether students with missing test scores would have had higher or lower scores than those with test scores available.

3. TEST SCORES OF FES STUDENTS IN 2020-21

We report test scores in the form of the normal curve equivalent (NCE) scores. The NCE is a normalized standard score with a mean of 50 and a standard deviation of 21.06. The scale corresponds to national percentile ranks (NPR) at 1, 50, and 99. As reported in the previous section, schools administered different nationally norm-referenced tests approved by the FDOE. Reporting test scores as normal curve equivalent scores ensures reasonable comparability across schools and program participants. Moreover, normal curve equivalent scores convey information about students' rankings compared with normal standards.

Figure 1 presents the basic distribution of reading and math scores of FES students participating in the program in 2020-21. Most of the students were in the middle of the test score distributions. The average normal curve equivalent score for FES students was 45.8th in reading and 41.9th in math in 2020-21. In terms of corresponding national percentile rankings, the typical student in the FES Program scored at the 44.6th national percentile in reading and the 38.8th national percentile in math.

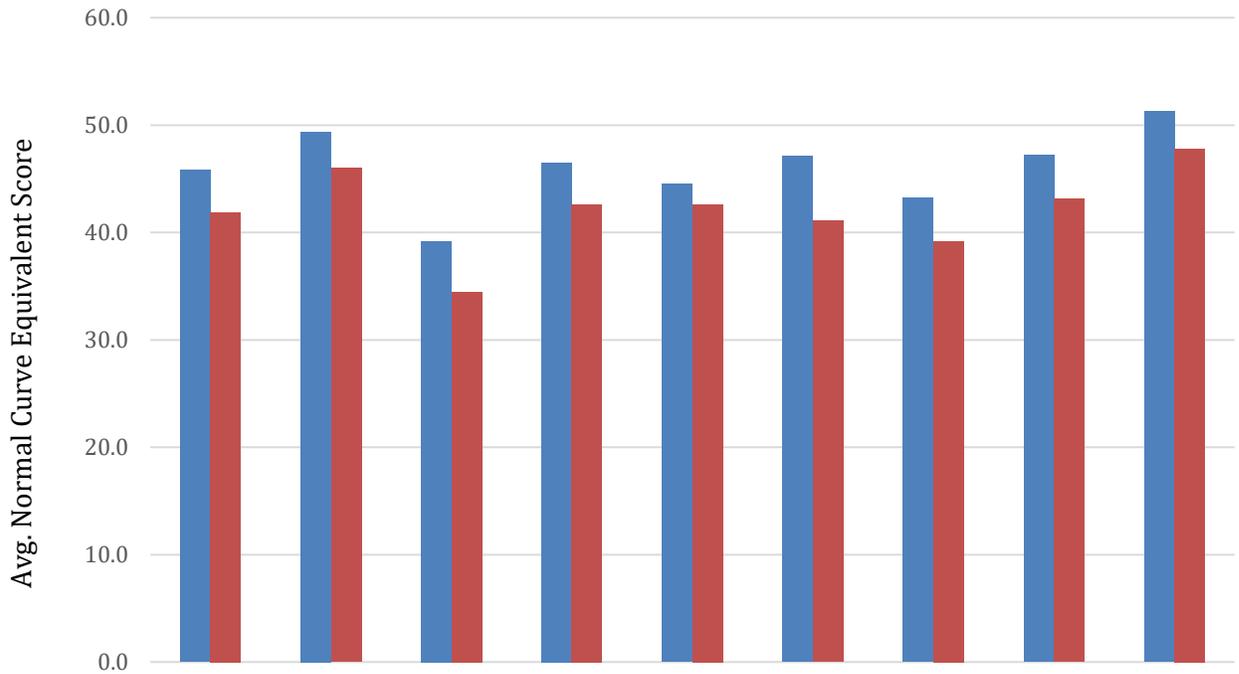


Average test scores in 2020-21 by attributes of program participants

We provided a breakdown of test scores of 2020-21 program participants by race, gender, and percent of poverty. Percent of poverty is expressed in terms of likely eligibility for the federal free or reduced lunch program based upon the federal poverty guidelines.² Students from families who have incomes below 130 percent of the federal poverty line are eligible for free school meals, while those from families with incomes between 130 and 185 percent of the poverty line are eligible for reduced-price meals.

² LSI used data from the Florida Department of Education for these analyses.

Figure 2: Average test scores of program participants in 2020-21 by attributes



		All Students	White	Black	Other Race	Male	Female	Income < 130% of poverty	Income 130- 185% of poverty	Income > 185% of poverty
■	Reading	45.8	49.4	39.2	46.5	44.5	47.1	43.2	47.2	51.3
■	Math	41.9	46.0	34.5	42.6	42.6	41.1	39.2	43.1	47.8

As seen in Figure 2, white participants had higher mean scores than black participants or participants of other races. Males tended to perform slightly better than females in math, while females tended to perform better than males did in reading. Lastly, students from relatively higher-income families tended to score better than students from relatively lower-income families.

4. ATTRIBUTES OF NEW PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS IN 2020-21

We examined attributes of new FES students in 2020-21 in order to see whether they were systematically different from eligible non-participant students before participating in the FES Program in 2020-21.

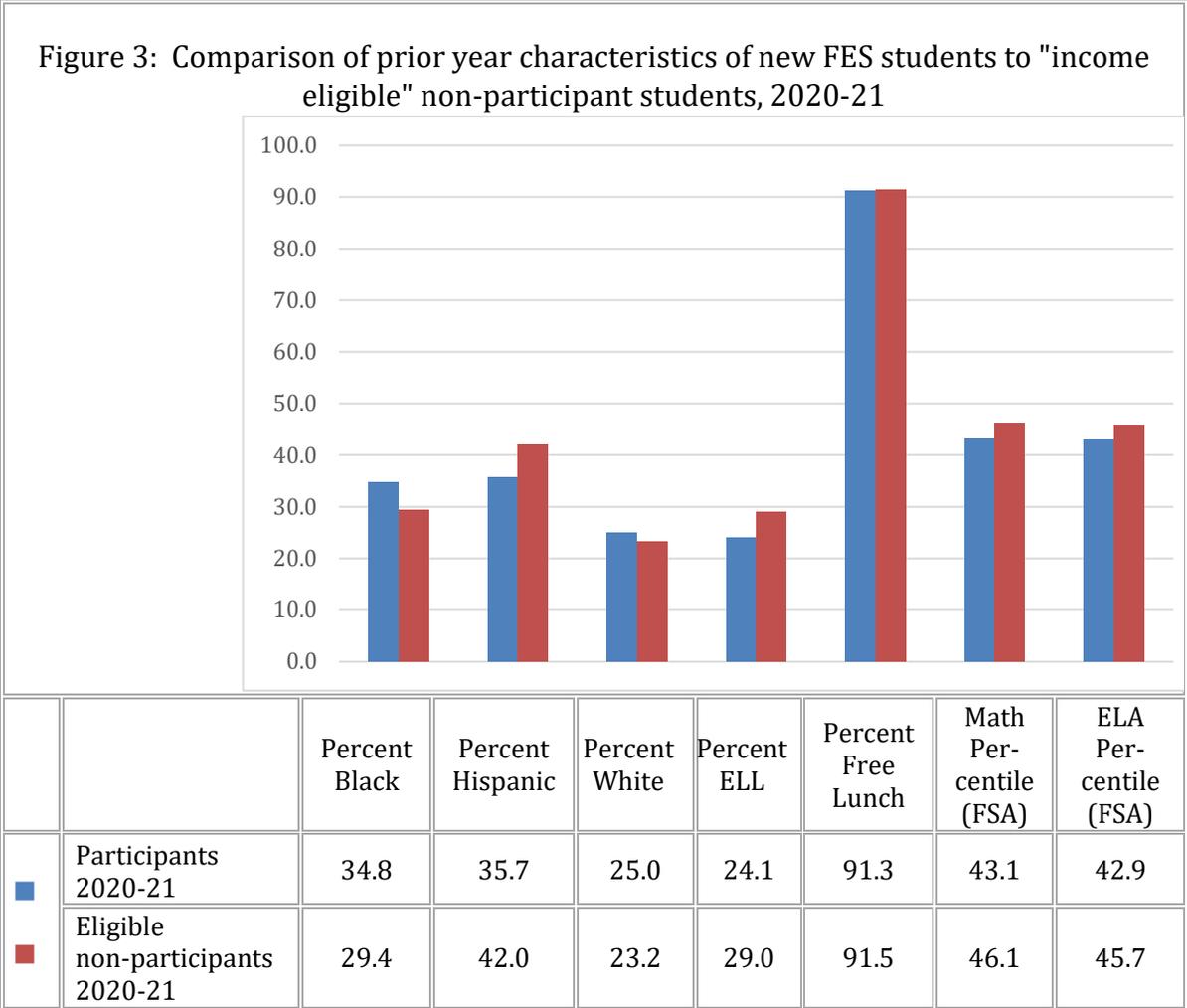
Due to the Florida Department of Education's Emergency Order (DOE Order No. 2020-E0-01) waiving the 2019-20 statewide assessment requirements, we used the most recent data available to us, which was from the 2018-19 academic year. In order to make plausible comparisons among students who spent the 2018-19 academic year in Florida public schools, we compared students who entered the FES Scholarship Program in 2020-21 to subsidized school meal eligible students who did not enter the program in that year but stayed free or reduced-price lunch eligible in 2020-21. We excluded students with disabilities who could participate in the McKay Scholarship Program. We limited the analysis to students who had taken either an ELA or math test in public school in 2018-19. We also restricted analysis to students who would be in grade 10 or below in 2020-21.³ With these criteria, we compared 5,899 new students in the FES Program in 2020-21 to 533,676 students who remained in the public schools and continued on subsidized school lunches in 2020-21. We used Florida Department of Education records for these comparisons.

Comparison of characteristics of new FES students and non-participant students

Newly participating FES students in 2020-21 were more likely to be black and less likely to be Hispanic than students who were eligible but did not participate as seen

³ Students who were in grades 9 and 10 in 2018-19 are excluded since they are not tested in 2020-21.

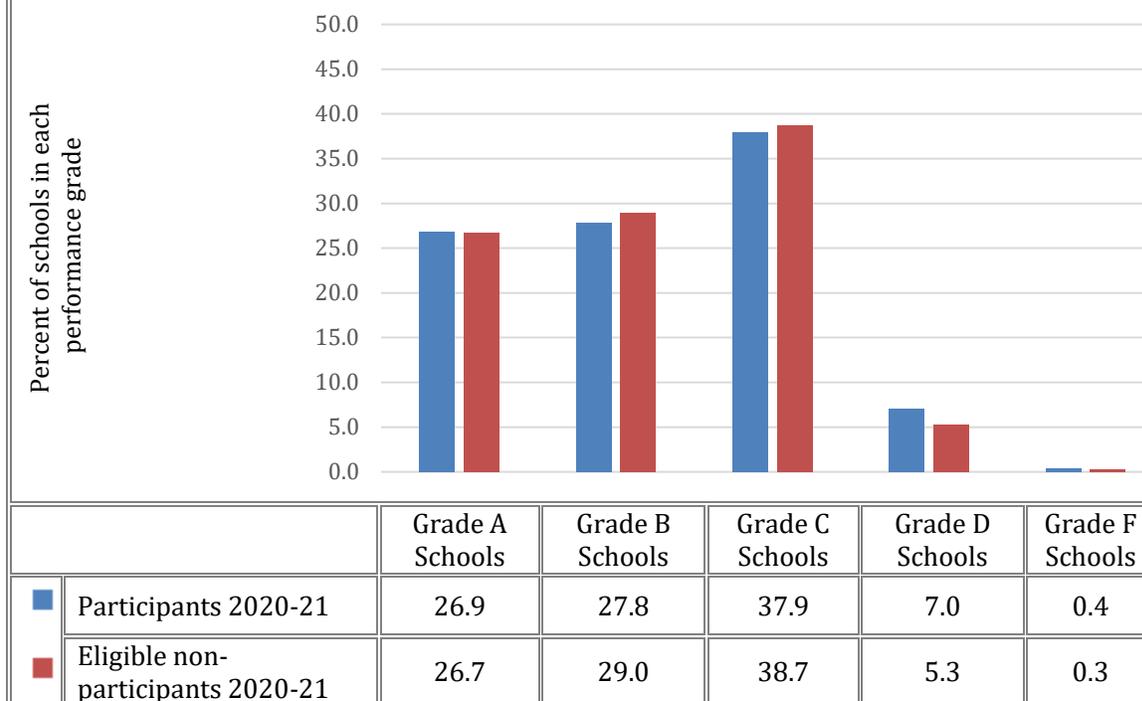
in Figure 3. Furthermore, new FES participants were slightly more likely to be white than were eligible non-FES participants. New FES participants were less likely to be English-language learners (ELL) than were eligible non-participants. While both new FES students and non-participant students were eligible for subsidized lunch in the 2018-19 school year, the share of new FES students who were free-lunch eligible was similar to the share of free-lunch eligible, non-participant students. Lastly, compared to eligible non-participant students, new FES students had poorer test performance both in ELA and math before entering the FES Program.



Comparison of new FES students and non-participant students in terms of performance of their schools in 2018-19

In Florida, each public school is assigned a school grade (A-F) based on student performance. We compared new FES students and eligible non-participant students in terms of the performance of the schools that they attended in the 2018-19 school year. We observed that the percentage of new FES students who came from high performing public schools is similar to the percentage of eligible non-participant students. On a scale of A-F, with A being the highest performing schools, 26.9 percent of new FES students were in schools graded "A", before attending a school in the FES Program, while 26.7 percent of eligible non-participant students were in schools graded "A" in the 2018-19 school year. At the other end of the spectrum, there were slightly more new FES students that attended a lower performing school than did eligible non-participant students, where 7.4 percent of new FES students were in schools graded "D" or "F", as compared with 5.6 percent of eligible non-participant students who were in schools graded "D" or "F" (see Figure 4).

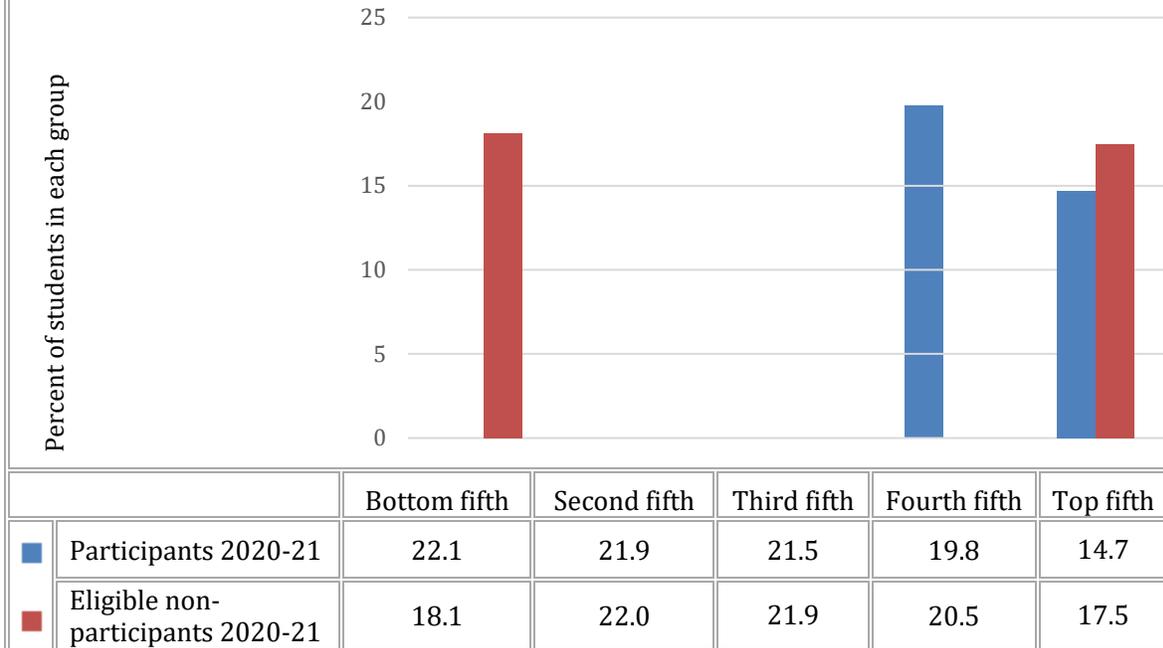
Figure 4: Comparison of the share of new FES participants by the performance of their previously attended public school to eligible non-participants



Comparison of new FES students and non-participant students within their schools in terms of performance in 2018-19

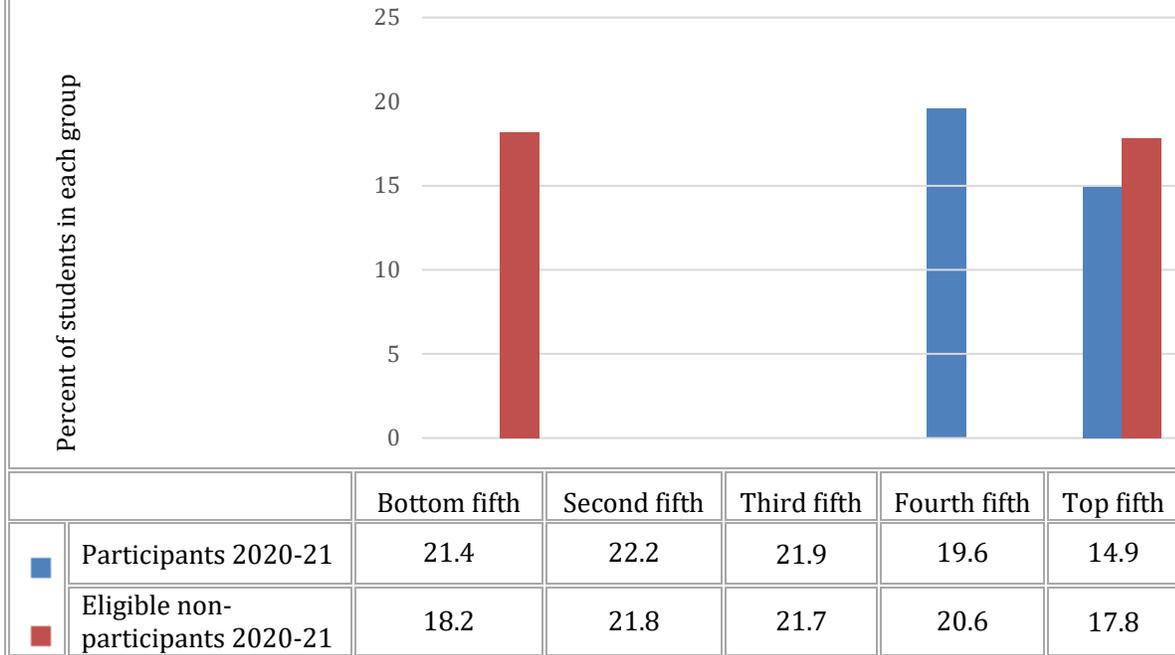
We also examined new FES students’ performance relative to eligible non-participant students in their own schools before entering the FES Program. The percentage of new FES students in the bottom fifth of their prior public school's ELA FSA test score distribution was higher (22.1 percent) than non-participating students (18.1 percent); see Figure 5. At the top fifth of the distribution, the percentage of new FES students was lower (14.7 percent) compared to non-participating students (17.5 percent).

Figure 5: Comparison by quintile of new FES students in 2020-21 to eligible non-participant students of school ELA FSA score distribution



For the math FSA test score distribution, 21.4 percent of new FES students were in the bottom fifth of their prior public school’s math distribution, while 18.2 percent of non-participating eligible students were in the bottom fifth of the distribution. At the top of the math test score distribution, 14.9 percent of new FES students were in the top fifth of the distribution, as compared with 17.8 percent of eligible non-participating students in the top fifth of the distribution (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Comparison by quintile of new FES students in 2020-21 to eligible non-participant students of school math FSA score distribution



Findings regarding the attributes of new program participants suggest that new FES students in 2020-21 – compared to subsidized lunch eligible, non-participant students – were relatively lower-performing prior to entering the FES Program. Moreover, they were more likely to come from low performing public schools and less likely to be high performing students in their prior public schools before attending the program.

7. CONCLUSION

This report shares findings on the compliance and performance of private schools that participated in the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Educational Options (FES) program in 2020-21. Compliance with program testing requirements was

high in 2020-21. Private schools reported test scores for 89.4 percent of program participants in grades 3-10.

FES students scored at the 45.8th normal curve equivalent in reading and the 41.9th normal curve equivalent in math in 2020-21, which corresponds to the 45th national percentile in reading and the 39th national percentile in math. Lower-performing public school students eligible for the FES Program were more likely to attend a private school under the FES Program.

This report serves as a baseline for future evaluations. In subsequent reports, information such as the performance of FES students from 2020-21 to 2021-22 can provide further insight into the FES program.