

## Florida voucher program set to expand

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THE CAPITAL, TALLAHASSEE — Florida's corporate school voucher program could expand by \$35 million next year, which would be enough to send 6,000 additional children on the waiting list to private schools throughout the state.

"There are huge opportunities for students who are waiting in line right now to participate in that," said Rep. Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, who sponsored legislation last year that allows the voucher program to expand continually without legislative approval.

Florida's Tax Credit Scholarship program, which uses donations from companies that get a tax credit in return, pays for the private school education of more than 33,000 low income students. For years, the program was capped at \$118 million — and the state rarely got that in donations — but last year, lawmakers approved an expansion of the program that will allow it to continually offer more vouchers.

Under the new law, the cap was expanded to \$140 million. If donations reached 90 percent of the limit, then the cap could expand again by 25 percent. The measure also provided additional tax credits for the program, adding oil and gas severance taxes, beverage taxes on

alcohol and other types of business taxes to those against which businesses can get credits for contributing to a scholarship.

Last month, scholarship administrators were told that the \$140 million cap had been reached, meaning the scholarship cap could expand to \$175 million. Jon East, policy and public affairs director for school choice group Step Up For Students, said it's been a "very encouraging year" for the program, which has been able to put about 6,000 more students into private schools.

There are also about 6,000 more on the waiting list who could potentially attend private school if the donations surpass the \$140 million mark, East said.

"There is some kind of explosion of demand," he said.

Students who qualify get a flat stipend that they can use at a number of private schools approved by the state. The new law, which went into effect July 1, allows the flat rate to ultimately reach 80 percent of the state's per pupil funding level, which is \$6,843 for the current fiscal year.

Incoming Gov. Rick Scott has largely been supportive of school choice, appearing at a rally organized by Step Up For Students, but has also signaled his intent to eliminate the corporate income tax

over time. He has said he hopes to be able to find a new incentive to get companies to put money into the voucher program.

"It's one of those things that we've got to work with the governor on that and make sure we're all still on the page," Weatherford said.

The Florida Education Association, the statewide lobbying wing for individual district teachers' unions, campaigned against the expansion of the voucher program and has said it has concerns that voucher expansion proposals would take attention away from public schools, which are attended by the majority of school-age children in the state.

A spokesman for the FEA said to his knowledge there has not been any discussion of an attempt to scale back the program.

One proposal being championed by Scott transition adviser Patricia Levesque, who heads former Gov. Jeb Bush's education foundation, is an education savings account that would give any Florida student public dollars to pay for private or virtual school, tutoring or a college prepaid plan.

An outline of potential legislation has been formulated and was included in briefing papers the Scott team released late last month. However, no bill has been filed so far.