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Scott signs legislation to expand charter schools

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News Channel 8

ST. PETERSBURG — During a stop at a Christian school in St. Petersburg on Monday, Gov. Rick Scott signed new legislation aimed at giving children more options when choosing where they attend school.

“Every school doesn't work [for] every child,” Scott said. “We know all children can learn. So creating more options for our parents and students is the right thing to do.”

Scott signed five new pieces of legislation into law at St. Petersburg Christian School. The first aims at giving charter schools a chance to grow. If one earns an “A” twice in three years, it can earn a “high-performing status,” allowing administrators to increase enrollment and open more schools.

The second piece of legislation expands virtual education to include full-time instruction in K-12 as well as part-time instruction in grades 4-12.

The third piece redefines a failing school. Before, schools that earned an “F” two years in a row were deemed to be failing. Now, those that earn two “F”s within four years are considered failing.

“We have redefined what makes a failing school, so more students and their parents will be empowered to choose a better school and with it a better future,” Scott told the crowd of about 50 that had crowded into the school's library. “Children should not be locked into a failing school just be-

cause of where they live.”

Another piece of the legislation focuses on students with special learning needs. It offers more scholarships so they can attend private school.

Lastly, the state is now encouraging more businesses to take part in the tax credit scholarship program, which should mean more money for low-income students who want to go to private school.

Henry Payne, a St. Petersburg pastor whose wife is battling cancer, said he was in a bind when it came to affording a quality education for the four grandchildren he is raising. But he said they're all going to private school now.

“All of these kids would have been another statistic because they grew up in a drug-infested area,” Payne said. “Our kids went from knowing nothing -- because they had never been in school -- to becoming A-average students and well-disciplined.”

Scott's critics argue he is creating too many alternatives to traditional schools without strengthening public schools. Scott, however, disagrees.

“We're doing everything we can to have great public schools. The public schools are always going to be the backbone of our state,” Scott said.

“What we want to do is create as much competition as we can so our parents have choices, so it raises the standard for all of our schools.”