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Low-income families lining up for vouchers in Florida

Step Up for Students, the Tampa-based group that administers tax-credit vouchers statewide, said in a press release today that it received more than 33,000 new applications this year before cutting off the process May 21.

That's up a ton from last year, and months ahead of last year's cutoff. And it's another strong sign that demand for vouchers among low-income families is rising fast.

According to Step Up for Students spokesman Jon East, the group received 22,000 new applications last year between the start of the application period, April 1, and mid September. New applications are filled out by families who aren't already in the program.

The number of available vouchers will rise by a few thousand this year, up from the 34,000 or so given out last year. But given the spike in applications, it looks like the state is headed for a long waiting list - and more political pressure for another expansion.

In a related development today, a report released by the left-leaning Center on Education Policy says "a decade of voucher research finds no clear positive impact on student academic achievement." It drew this in-your-face retort from a senior fellow at the Foundation for Educational Choice.

Here's the full press release from Step Up For Students:

Enrollment in Florida's Tax Credit Scholarship for low-income students increased 20 percent last year, and interest for this fall is so great applications had to be cut off in May. That's the earliest in the 10-year history of the program.

"We're seeing an explosion of interest from low-income parents even though we've done little marketing of the program," said Doug Tuthill, president of Step Up For Students, the nonprofit organization that helps administer the scholarship. "We knew the demand was there, but this pace of rapid growth has surprised us."

For the year just ended, 2010-11, the scholarship served roughly 34,600 students in 1,100 different private schools — an increase of about 5,700 students over the previous year and more than triple the number from 2004-05. But those enrollment numbers tell only part of the story. Last year, applications were closed in September, leaving a waiting list of about 8,000 students for the 2010-11 school year. This spring, Step Up For Students heard from more than 33,000 new students before shutting off applications on May 21 (renewal students receive preference and can still apply). Step Up officials say they don't know yet how many of the new applicants will qualify or can be served for the fall. But even since the May closing, 5,500 additional students have joined a waiting list.

The Tax Credit Scholarship was created in 2001 to give education options to K-12 students whose household income qualifies them for free or reduced-price lunch. The program is financed by companies that receive dollar-for-dollar state tax credits for their contributions, and those contributions are used to provide scholarships this fall worth up to \$4,011. That's a decrease of \$95 from last year due to cuts in public school spending.

The students who choose the scholarship tend to be among the poorest and lowest-performing students in public education. In 2010-11, the average household income for scholarship students was \$25,971, or 21 percent above poverty. Two-thirds were black or Hispanic, and three-fifths lived in single-parent households. A state-contracted researcher concluded that the students who choose the scholarship were among the lowest-performing in the public schools they left behind. In the most recent academic report, those scholarship students achieved the same gains on standardized tests as students of all income levels nationally.

Enrollment in the scholarship program is capped by law, but in 2010 the Legislature streamlined the process to allow for 25 percent growth following any year in which at least 90 percent of the cap is reached. In the first year under the new law, 2010-11, the \$140 million tax credit cap was reached halfway through the fiscal year. In the second year, 2011-12, Step Up reports that it is on pace to raise the full \$175 million cap. If the 90 percent threshold is reached again, the cap for 2012-13 will increase to \$218.7 million.

"The importance of the 2010 law is clearer than ever," Tuthill says. "I would hate to think how long the waiting list would be without it."

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