Since it began in 2002, the Florida Tax Credit (FTC) Scholarship has successfully provided lower-income students with greater access to additional public and private school options, growing from about 15,000 students in its first year to over 107,000 today. This year nearly 1,200 Lee County students are using FTC scholarships to access a school that better meets their needs. Unfortunately, the demand for FTC scholarships is outpacing supply. Currently, there are 35,505 students who are eligible for FTC scholarships but do not have a scholarship because of insufficient funds.

To help address this extraordinary demand, the Legislature and Gov. Ron DeSantis created the Florida Empowerment Scholarship (FES) this year. This helped, but this new scholarship program reached its capacity of 18,000 students within three months of becoming law.

Florida needs to serve more kids. Two Lee County families illustrate why.

The FTC scholarship has been transformational for Cindy Bisanti and her daughter Sofia, 10. The single mother in Cape Coral believed Sofia’s zoned public school wasn’t challenging her.

“I did the math,” Bisanti said, “and she was getting 1½ hours of real learning while I was spending an hour or two in the pickup line each day. I figured I can do it myself.”

So Bisanti home schooled Sofia, plowing through first and second grade in one year, and fourth and fifth grade in another. When Sofia’s father this year asked that his daughter return to a brick-and-mortar school, Bisanti balked at sending her back to a district school, which she said would’ve enrolled her according to her age group, not her academic level. Sofia would’ve been grouped with fifth-graders despite learning on a seventh-grade level.

Then Bisanti found a compromise: Cape Academy, which specializes in working with students who aren’t thriving in district schools.

It seemed like the perfect fit for Sofia, but Bisanti, who cleans homes for a living, couldn’t afford the tuition on her salary. Fortunately, the school informed her of the FTC scholarship. She applied in August, and Sofia was awarded a scholarship.

Bisanti calls the scholarship “a blessing” and says Sofia is “thriving” in her new environment. Her daughter likes the smaller class sizes, and the fact that Cape Academy customizes instruction to fit each child’s needs.

Nina Russello is desperate for her children to enjoy this same kind of success.

Russello, also from Cape Coral, said she was in tears when she found out there weren’t enough funds to provide her son Jacob, a fourth-grader, and granddaughter Camille, a first-grader, with scholarships.

She was dissatisfied with the children’s assigned district school and sent them to a private school where they benefited from the change. However, Russello became unemployed right before the school year began, rendering her unable to afford the private school tuition. That’s when she applied for a scholarship and was found eligible but put on hold because of insufficient funds. She’s been home schooling Jacob and Camille ever since, but that’s a temporary solution.

“I’m a mom. I’m not a teacher,” Russello said. “It’s a challenge to respond when you are a parent and need to be the teacher. I want them to be around other kids and experience what the other kids are experiencing.”

To ensure families like Nina Russello’s have the same education options as Cindy Bisanti’s, the Florida Legislature must allow the FES program to serve more students. No child’s future should be put on hold.

- Doug Tuthill is president of Step Up For Students.