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## Expanding Florida school voucher program is a bad idea

### Times Editorial

With Florida facing a \$3 billion deficit and striving to maintain momentum in improving public schools, this is an odd time to talk about expanding tuition vouchers for private schools. Yet voucher supporters are pushing legislation that would divert more tax money to the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship and raise the value of each voucher. Legislators should keep the focus on improving public education and reject this legally suspect bid to siphon more public money away to private schools.

The voucher program for low-income students is one of two surviving voucher programs embraced by former Gov. Jeb Bush and approved by the Legislature. Nearly 25,000 students use the vouchers at more than 1,000 private schools, and companies get dollar-for-dollar state tax credits toward both corporate income taxes and insurance premium taxes for contributing to the program. Supporters of the program are well intentioned in their efforts to assist often struggling students from low-income families. But there are fundamental questions that should be answered before the program is expanded:

**Is this voucher program constitutional?**

More than eight of 10 schools in the program in 2008-09 were faith-based. The state Constitution bars state money from going to religious institutions, and an appellate court cited that ban in declaring a broader voucher program illegal. The Florida Supreme Court cited another provision in 2006 to invalidate that program, and the same flaws are evident in both the Corporate Tax Credit voucher and the McKay Scholarship vouchers for disabled students.

### Is this good tax policy?

Corporations already can avoid paying their entire corporate tax bill or insurance premium tax bill by earmarking the money for vouchers. The legislation would add to the list the alcoholic beverage excise tax, direct pay sales and use tax, and the oil and gas severance tax. Letting taxpayers earmark their tax bills for specific purposes is a dangerous path. Using this logic, taxpayers could argue they only want their tax money spent on public education or environmental programs they support. They could starve unpopular but necessary state programs such as prisons. State government cannot function that way.

### Is this good education policy?

One state study says vouchers saved the state about \$39 million in

2007-08, because individual vouchers are worth less than per student funding in public schools. But moving a few students from individual public schools does not significantly reduce that school's operating expenses. An independent study last year found students in the corporate tax credit voucher program performed no better or worse academically than voucher-eligible students who chose to stay in public school.

To their credit, supporters of this voucher program have embraced more accountability over the years after a rocky start. The legislation sponsored by Rep. Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, would require any school with at least 30 voucher students to report the school's performance on norm-referenced tests. It is a step in the right direction, but only roughly 10 percent of the participating schools have that many voucher students.

Sometimes, good intentions are not enough. Until the broader legal and policy questions are answered, legislators have no business expanding voucher programs. The primary education issue is not how to pay for an escape route to private school for low-income families. It is how to best use modest public resources to improve public schools for the benefit of all students.