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Proposed legislation would strengthen Florida's school voucher program



By Doug Tuthill

The legislative push this year to strengthen a learning option for poor and struggling schoolchildren strikes a refreshing political balance. The bill, filed by Rep. Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, says that private schools accepting scholarships need to reveal more about their test scores and finances, and the state needs to be fairer about enrollment and money.

The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship is just 8 years old, but already serves 27,722 low-income students in 1,020 private schools. Students who choose this program, according to a state-issued report last June, are among the poorest and lowest-performing in their former public schools. That same report said test score gains for scholarship students in 2007-08 were on a par with students of all income levels nationally.

What is unusual about this scholarship is that while it costs \$7,000 less per student, it is the only major education option with an arbitrary enrollment cap. Weatherford's bill begins to address this oddity by allowing the cap to increase automatically once tax-credited contributions have reached 90 percent and by indexing the maximum scholarship, currently \$3,950, to four-

fifths of the base spending formula for public school students. That four-fifths translates to about half the total money spent per-student in public schools and means the scholarships would still cost taxpayers less than other options such as charter and virtual schools.

The bill also increases the program's transparency and accountability. Current standardized test score gains would be disclosed for schools with at least 30 scholarship students, and a financial review would be required for schools receiving at least \$250,000 in scholarship money. Those provisions would make Florida's tax credit scholarship the most transparent and accountable in the nation.

Some of our school district friends oppose these scholarships because they help low-income children attend private schools, but the old public school vs. private school wars are increasingly irrelevant. Public education today is customizing learning options — including magnets, fundamentals, charters and online schools — to better match each child to the learning environment that best meets his or her needs. Consider this: One in every 20 students now attends a private charter school, an alternative that didn't exist a generation ago.

The Tax Credit Scholarship has

achieved bipartisan political support, in part, because it is not a threat to public education. On the contrary, it is a learning option designed to help public education fulfill its historical commitment to provide equal opportunity to disadvantaged students.

Last year, when almost half the Democrats, a majority of the Black Caucus and the entire Hispanic Caucus voted to support the program, an African-American Democrat from St. Petersburg rose to make a similar point.

"By voting for this legislation," said Rep. Darryl Rouson, "we are not robbing public education of dollars. We are enhancing it. We are supplementing it where necessary."

The average household income of these scholarship students is only 20 percent above poverty. Three-fifths of them are from single-parent households, and three-fourths are of color. For these children, particularly those who are struggling, the scholarship can represent a second chance. Weatherford's bill aims to keep that door open.

Tuthill, a former teachers union president, is president of Step Up For Students, a nonprofit organization that helps administer the Tax Credit Scholarship program.

VOUCHERS, LOCALLY

Currently, more than 350 students on the Treasure Coast have been awarded Florida Tax Credit Scholarships, funded by businesses that direct a portion of their state taxes to help pay (\$3,950 per student) for lower-income students to attend private schools.

Here's a breakdown on the Treasure Coast:

Indian River County

Ebenezer Christian Academy: 9

Master's Academy Of Vero Beach: 34
St. Edward's School: 15
Suncoast Primary School: 10
Tabernacle Baptist Christian School: 5
The Willow School: 6
Touched By Grace Academy: 1

Martin County

Community Christian Academy: 34
First Baptist Christian School: 33
Hobe Sound Christian Academy: 13
Redeemer Lutheran School: 2

St. Joseph Catholic School: 3
The Pine School: 1
Trinity United Methodist School: 13

St. Lucie County

Barnabas Christian Academy: 28
Bethany School: 23
Golden Rule Academy: 33
J E S Memorial SDA School: 32
St. James Kids Academy: 12
Treasure Coast Christian Academy: 53