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Voucher plan gives students a chance

Florida lawmakers will decide on a House bill this session that would expand the Tax Credit Scholarship, the school voucher program that serves 27,600 low-income students in 1,002 private schools statewide.

Sponsored by Rep. Will Weatherford of Wesley Chapel, HB 1009 would require posting of individual school test score gains and disclosure of finances if the schools receive \$250,000 or more in tax credit funds. It would also increase the amount of the \$3,950 scholarship by indexing it to per-student public school spending and turn the scholarship cap into a rolling cap that automatically increases. Companies that contribute to the program get dollar-for-dollar state tax credits toward corporate income taxes and taxes on insurance premiums.

Although reports conflict on whether vouchers significantly reduce the funds of public schools and although the courts will have to rule on the constitutional issues, some evidence shows that many students using the vouchers benefit from the program.

Voucher advocates argue that norm-referenced test scores do not measure the full value of these schools. Certain intangibles, such as parents' satisfaction with the school, should be considered in measures of school performance. That is especially true for low-income African-American parents who often feel alienated from their children's public schools.

When I visited the Yvonne Reed Christian School in St. Petersburg last week, which has 92 students, 86 of whom qualify for the federal free or reduced lunch program, I spoke with several parents and a grandfa-

ther. They said they are pleased



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with the school's zero tolerance for "bad" behavior, and they like its orderliness, cleanliness, politeness and security. Each said the school felt like a "family," where the teachers and the owner, Yvonne Reed-Clayton, "respect" them and want them to participate in every facet of the school. Many parents volunteer.

I was surprised that none had animosity toward the public schools they had left. The comments of Russell Cato, a retiree who taught in Pinellas schools for 42 years, capture the sentiments of the others.

"I came to this school because I have a grandson who is capable of learning, but there were problems with his behavior in the public school," he said. "As a teacher, I figured this thing out years ago. If we don't control these kids' behavior, the academic part will get left behind. The public school teachers just couldn't do what they needed to do in order to cut down on my grandson's negative behavior. I'm not going to blame teachers in the public school system. Their hands are closely tied.

"Like everybody else here, I was being constantly called about my kid, to come pick him up. I knew I needed an institution that will control my boy's behavior, so that when he gets out of order, they can put him in order in a positive way. The teachers here are in control, and there are 12 to 14 kids to a class. My grandson never had a male teacher until he came here. He looked up at this big man, and he was scared. He

said, 'My God!' Right away, he had to adjust to the size of this guy. Now, he's reading well, not that he could not have done it in public school. But he's given a lot of time here."

Reed-Clayton established the school in 1996, when she retired from Pinellas schools after 34 years in the classroom. The school is successful primarily because she develops positive relations with parents from the moment they register their children. She makes them feel wanted. She also insists that students put their bad experiences behind them as best as they can.

"If a student tells me he was retained," she said, "I tell him not to mention the word 'retain' again. It's a stigma on children. You're in a new school. I tell my teachers that our children are important. Let them know you care. If a child doesn't know something, it's my responsibility to teach them and not blame them. I know where these children are coming from. I was on welfare. I know their wants and needs. I was that person."

Obviously, Reed-Clayton is doing something right. She administers the norm-referenced Stanford Achievement Test, 10th Edition, to the kindergarten class, where reading is emphasized. For 2008-09, the pupils' average scoring was at the grade-level equivalent of 1.1, an impressive result.

Reed-Clayton said the parents of her students insist on the "old-school," "back-to-basics" approach to education. Excuses and blame are unacceptable.

"Because people are low income, it doesn't mean they don't care about their children and don't want them to get a good education," she said. "These parents care about their kids. They want them to have the best education. And the tax credit scholarship affords them the opportunity."