Expand scholarship program

Florida House Speaker Will Weatherford puts it well when he says, “No child’s future should be dictated by their ZIP code.”

Yet ZIP codes can largely determine a child’s education opportunities.

Children are assigned to public schools based on their addresses. Districts such as Hillsborough, to their credit, do offer students some options beyond neighborhood schools.

Still, those options are limited, and a poor family can’t afford private school, if that looks to be the best choice for their child.

This is why Weatherford and Senate President Don Gaetz are correct to support bolstering the Florida Tax Credit Scholarships, which provide private school vouchers to children from disadvantaged families.

The program empowers poor families to find the school that works best for their child.

Under the program, companies receive a tax credit by contributing to the scholarship funds. State dollars are not directly used on the vouchers, avoiding any legal issues.

The program was adopted in 2001 and has proved effective, serving about 60,000 students in about 1,400 private schools.

Because of limited funds, there is a huge backlog of students. More than 30,000 had to be excluded last year.

Legislation proposed this session would increase the tax credit cap over the next four years to $730 million, which would allow the program to serve twice as many students.

The proposal would also increase the amount of the scholarship, which is $4,880. As Step Up for Students — which administers the scholarships — points out, that is about two-thirds of the average tuition and fees of the participating private schools, which is $7,494.

The legislation would change the scholarship from 80 percent of the Florida Education Finance Program per-pupil funding formula for public school students to 84 percent. (Gov. Rick Scott’s proposed budgets calls for a per-pupil public school funding of $6,949.)

Perhaps most importantly, the proposal would provide much-needed flexibility for scholarship eligibility, which now is strictly limited to families that qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

Under current law, if a mother or father receives a raise and loses the lunch assistance, their child also loses the scholarship.

That makes little sense. The legislation being prepared would give partial scholarships to students with incomes that exceed that level — up to 260 percent of poverty level, about $62,010 for a family of four.

Other provisions would allow retailers to contribute to the scholarship fund and tighten the oversight of the scholarships.

Public schools undoubtedly are the best choice for most students, but some students need the personal attention and structure of private schools. Poor children should not be deprived that option.

Studies have found that the scholarships are frequently utilized by students who were among the poorest and most academically challenged in public schools. So the scholarships can be seen as easing the formidable challenges public schools confront.

The Florida Tax Scholarship releases students from the limitations of ZIP codes and poverty. Lawmakers should adopt it.