Our Views

Sensible voucher expansion

The public school establishment is furious that in the closing hours of the Legislature law- makers were able to revive a measure expanding the state’s voucher program that had been thought dead.

But Florida parents and taxpayers should be grateful lawmakers found a way to support an economical program that gives families more education options.

The legislation poses no threat to public schools, which will remain the choice of most Floridians. But it will give more poor and working-class families the ability to at least consider private schools, if they believe that might be best for their children.

Critics characterize the legislation as an insidious attack on public schools.

Joanne McCall, vice president of the Florida Education Association, the teachers’ union, said, “FEA is outraged that the Florida Senate attached corporate voucher expansion onto an unrelated bill and slipped it into law on the session’s final day. This expansion of vouchers comes at the expense of public schools. ...”

The Florida Tax Scholarship Program does not divert state dollars to public schools.

Under the program, companies receive a tax credit by contributing to the scholarship fund. State funds are not used directly for private schools. It is no more a diversion of funds from public schools than any other state tax break.

And the program currently pays about $4,880 per student, while the state pays close to $7,000 per public school student.

Studies show that the majority of students using the scholarships were struggling in their prior schools.

So the scholarships can help address the needs of these challenged students for less money than the state pays per public school student.

Currently to be eligible a family must make no more than 185 percent of the federal poverty level — $43,578 for a family of four.

The Legislature’s changes would make eligible families making up to 260 percent of the federal poverty level — $62,010 for a family of four.

Families earning between 200 percent and 260 percent of the federal poverty level would receive partial scholarships.

Raising the income eligibility makes private school a possibility for moderate income families. It also addresses the current problem of a family suddenly becoming ineligible because the father or mother receives a raise or gets a better job.

The eligibility criteria won’t be adopted until 2016-17.

Critics complain that there is no accountability in the scholarship program, though there has been regular testing of scholarship participants, which have found they are holding their own academically.

This legislation would require private schools with a majority of voucher students to report standardized test results, though the schools would not be required to use the same standardized test as public schools.

This makes sense because the private schools may not be teaching the same curriculum as public schools. Still, the state will need to maintain oversight and ensure scholarship students are learning the appropriate materials.

The fierce resistance of the public school establishment to the scholarships is somewhat understandable. Some lawmakers have acted as if private schools could do no wrong, while continually adding accountability mandates for public schools.

But the focus should be on what is best for students, not political battles. For most students, public school is the best choice. But some kids need the structure and personal attention more likely to be found in private school.

Giving more Florida children the opportunity to receive the education that works best for them is good for society and taxpayers.