Voucher program is expanding

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Florida’s Tax Credit Scholarship Program continues to grow rapidly, aided this year by a new law that allows more families to enroll.

The program awards income-based scholarships that cover private-school tuition and fees, or can pay a student’s transportation costs to a public school in another county. The scholarships, more commonly known as vouchers, are each worth $5,272 this school year.

Nearly 70,000 low-income students are participating, compared with 59,922 last year. Pinellas County has one of the highest participation rates with 2,690 students receiving the vouchers.

Of the more than 1,500 schools that participate statewide, more than 70 percent are faith-based.

The new law increased the amount of the vouchers, made it easier for students in grades 6-12 to qualify and raised the income limits so that, starting in 2016, working class families will qualify for partial scholarships.

How is it all paid for? Corporations redirect money they owe for certain state taxes to Step Up for Students, which for now is the only organization that administers the scholarships. The state, in turn, gives those corporations $1 in tax credits for every dollar they give.

The new law was one of the more controversial measures to make its way through the Legislature in 2014.

Opponents say it’s wrong to funnel money meant to benefit the general public into private, often religious, schools. Proponents say it’s all legitimate because the money used for the program never passes through a public agency before being used for the vouchers.

They also argue the program offers more choices to families who have had poor experiences with public schools.

Application time is approaching for families who want to try for a voucher for the 2015-16 school year. The deadline is April 30 for returning families to renew their applications. Families new to the program must apply and provide documentation. In both instances, they should visit stepupforstudents.org for information on how to apply or call toll free, 1-877-735-7877.