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State helps low-income students attend private schools

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For what it would cost Oristela Schwend to send just one of her three children to private school, she sends all of them.

Schwend of Plantation has sent her children to private schools in Broward County for several years using a state program that pays for tuition with money that would otherwise have been available for public purposes.

The 8-year-old Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program takes up to \$118 million in taxes that Florida businesses would have paid to the state and diverts the money to pay for private school tuition and fees for low-income families. For qualified applicants, the scholarships pay up to \$3,950 a year per child.

There is no deadline to apply for students new to the program — even though the start of the school year is right around the corner.

Schwend says dissatisfaction with her oldest son's public school four years ago led her to the program. At the time, her son's sixth-grade remedial English class at a public school held 50 students. When she sought the principal, she says three hours of waiting left her with no one to talk to about her concerns.

At Our Savior Lutheran School in Plantation, she says Patrick discovered his musical talent. And the classes were small. Now in high school at Coral Springs Christian Academy, he plays the saxophone in the school band and is on the headmaster's honor roll. Her younger children, Daniel and

Jessica, also attend. Schwend makes up what the tuition doesn't cover out of her own pocket.

"I've heard this money should go to the public schools. But that \$3,000 that I got four years ago, if it had been given to the public schools, where would [Patrick] be now?" she says. "It's meeting my kids' needs. They're not getting lost in the bureaucracy."

MORE KIDS ENROLLED

The program has grown significantly since it was created — despite complaints about the diversion of taxpayer dollars. It started with about 16,000 kids and now has about 23,400 statewide, including 5,600 students in Miami-Dade and 1,400 in Broward last school year.

This year, the state Legislature added a provision to allow insurance companies to participate along with other businesses in diverting up to 75 percent of their taxes to the program.

Some companies take special pride in their contribution: Hospital Corporation of America produced a 30-second commercial about their participation that features former Miami Dolphins coach Don Shula and his wife, Mary Anne.

The scholarships are for poor families who would probably qualify for free or reduced-priced meals at public schools. If parents' income rises, they might not qualify from one year to the next. Every application is vetted to verify income, says Jon East, a spokesman for Step Up For Students, the nonprofit organization that distributes the scholarships, unless a family already qualifies for food

stamps or other public assistance programs.

The program has been criticized since it was created and comparisons have been drawn between it and a now dead program that gave students who attended failing public schools public money to attend private schools. That voucher program was struck down by the Florida Supreme Court as unconstitutional in 2006.

CONTROVERSY

The Florida Education Association led the charge to that program's defeat, and the group is no fan of the tax-credit scholarships. Its opposition became more fierce last year, when the Legislature saw fit to increase the total amount of money — to \$118 million — that corporations can divert to the tax-credit program.

"At a time when schools are cutting programs and laying off teachers and other education professionals, we think this is a poor idea," FEA spokesman Mark Pudlow says.

Pudlow says the program may be successful anecdotally, but he said there's no analysis comparing the performance of students who make use of the scholarship to students in traditional public schools.

"If state lawmakers want a rigorous testing regimen to prove the value of education tax dollars going to public schools, why wouldn't they want an equally rigorous regimen for education tax dollars going to private schools?" he says.

Students who use the scholarships were first required to take standardized tests in the 2007-08 school year,

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and some even choose to take the FCAT at a public school. The results are reported for the entire group, however, to avoid identifying students, and schools can choose from a long list of tests to take. Most took the Stanford Achievement Test, and results this year showed the typical student in the program scored in the 44th percentile in reading and the 46th percentile in math.

Another program that pays for private school tuition for students with disabilities, the McKay Scholarship Program, continues. It enrolled about 20,000 students last school year.

It took Carol Smith of Miami

Gardens three attempts to qualify for tax credit scholarships for her children. She finally did four years ago, and her son and daughter have been in private school ever since.

Her son Salnave was in second grade then and starting to get in trouble for minor mischief. Testing revealed he wasn't being challenged in class and turned his boredom into distraction for other students, but he couldn't get advanced work at his public school. For her daughter Claudine, now an eighth-grader, it took a month to get an answer about a possible transfer to another classroom.

Both are now thriving at the 300-

student Miami Union Academy in North Miami, mom says, because the school's size guarantees lots of personal attention and small classes. About a third of the school's students attend using the tax-credit program.

Last year, Smith says her son won third place in the school spelling bee. And her daughter led the pledge of allegiance on the floor of the state House of Representatives while working as a page.

"I absolutely could not afford this [on my own]," Smith says. "And there's all good things I have to say."

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