

# EDUCATION WEEK

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## Expansions of State Voucher Programs Gain Momentum

By Lesli A. Maxwell

The momentum in Florida to expand one of that state's voucher programs is a subtle but significant sign that such programs, which have been anathema to many Democrats, are beginning to win bipartisan support in a number of states.

State lawmakers from both sides of the aisle in Florida are already voicing support for new legislation that would increase the value of the state's tax-credit vouchers, which are funded by private corporations that, in exchange for their contributions, receive dollar-for-dollar tax credits.

The legislation in Florida—a state that has done more than any other to provide publicly funded vouchers that can be used to pay tuition at private schools—comes as a similar measure has been introduced in Illinois, and as school choice advocates see promising signs in somewhat unexpected jurisdictions such as New Jersey. Democratic support for such programs has been based mainly in urban black and Latino communities.

“What we've been able to do here in Florida is to erase that disconnect between parents who wanted this kind of empowerment and those that represent them in the legislature,” said John Kirtley, a wealthy Tampa-area businessman who is the architect of the state's tax-credit voucher program.

Significant opposition to vouchers remains in Florida—chiefly from the Florida Education Association—but a growing number of Democrats in the Republican-dominated legislature and around the state have begun to shed their opposition to the usually politically polarizing issue, observers say.

It's a remarkable political shift in Florida, where few, if any, Democrats backed three separate voucher programs, including the tax-credit vouchers, when they were launched by then-Gov. Jeb Bush, a Republican. The state's original program, which provided vouchers to students who attended low-performing public schools, was struck down as un-



Elementary supervisor Mary Lynne Duet teaches a class at Tampa Bay Christian Academy in Tampa, Fla., earlier this month. The school has 42 students attending on tax credit scholarship vouchers, a program that could receive an expansion by the state legislature this year.

—Daniel Wallace/St. Petersburg Times/ZUMA

constitutional by the Florida Supreme Court in 2006. (“Fla. Court: Vouchers Unconstitutional,” Jan. 11, 2006.)

Forty percent of the families enrolled in Florida's tax-credit voucher program are African-American, while 25 percent are Latino, said Mr. Kirtley, who is the chairman of Step Up for Students, a non-profit organization he founded to administer the vouchers across much of the state.

All of the students using the tax-credit vouchers are poor.

In the earlier years of the program, Democratic lawmakers who represent most of those families opposed any kind of public funding of private school vouchers, Mr. Kirtley said. One key to changing minds, he said, was the testimony of poor parents whose children have received vouchers.

“When we would present Democratic

legislators with the long list of school choice options in Florida, including charters and virtual schools, we'd ask them, ‘Why are you against the only one that serves poor people?’ ” Mr. Kirtley said. “I really think we are getting to the point where Democrats who oppose parental choice for low-income families, or run campaigns on that sort of opposition, run a big risk [of putting their jobs in danger].”

### Momentum Elsewhere

In Illinois this month, a Democratic state senator from Chicago introduced legislation to provide tuition vouchers for students enrolled in some of the city's lowest-performing schools. Sen. James T. Meeks, who chairs that chamber's education committee and the legislature's black caucus, said he expects support from fellow Democrats.

New Jersey, a heavily unionized state

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dominated by Democrats, could become the next high-profile battleground over vouchers. Newly inaugurated Gov. Chris Christie, a Republican, championed vouchers and other forms of school choice in his successful campaign against incumbent Gov. Jon Corzine, a Democrat who was a staunch opponent of vouchers.

Mr. Christie also just appointed Bret Schundler, a pro-voucher former mayor of Jersey City, as New Jersey's education commissioner. Mr. Schundler was still awaiting confirmation by the state Senate.

School choice advocates hope Mr. Christie's leadership will revive a push by a group of influential Democratic urban lawmakers and community activists to bring vouchers to the eight cities in New Jersey where the public schools are most troubled.

Parting with the powerful 203,000-member New Jersey Education Association, an affiliate of the National Education Association, politicians such as Newark Mayor Cory Booker have aligned with other prominent Democrats. They include Assemblyman Joseph Cryan, who until recently was state party chairman, to support an effort that, like the Florida tax-credit vouchers, would give businesses state tax credits for their contributions.

A committee appointed by Mr. Christie to make recommendations on education policy advised the governor in January to back that effort, and to expand it beyond the eight cities.

"We may see a proposal from the governor because he's on the record for supporting these things, but we don't believe that New Jersey residents want to see their tax dollars used to subsidize private, parochial education," said Steven Baker, a spokesman for the New Jersey Education Association.

But in the District of Columbia, where federally funded vouchers for poor children have garnered robust support from local Democrats, the high-profile program is on the ropes.

The Obama administration and key Democrats in Congress are planning to let the 5-year-old D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program sunset over the next few years. President Barack Obama's fiscal 2011 budget request proposes \$9 million for the voucher program, but specifies that it will be the "final request" for federal money.

Under that scenario, no new students would be added to the program, and it would shut down once current students who are using vouchers graduate from high school. The nonprofit organization that was created to administer the Washington scholarships has also decided to no longer run the voucher program, creating even more uncertainty about its fate.

Voucher proponents say the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship program—which serves some 1,300 students from low-income families—is dying a political death with no regard for how the vouchers have worked for students. The administration is pushing for other education measures, such as merit pay for teachers and expansion of charter schools, that are often at odds with the priorities of the national teachers' unions and other public school advocates, and giving up the capital city's voucher program was an obvious trade-off, said one pro-voucher Democrat.

"They've hammered so hard on things like merit pay, teacher evaluations, and charter schools, that I think they thought they had to make this small political concession to the teachers' unions," said Kevin P. Chavous, a former District of Columbia council member who is a distinguished fellow with the Center for Education Reform, a pro-school-choice think tank in Washington.

Mr. Chavous, who advocates for vouchers around the nation, said he hopes an effort by U.S. Sens. Joseph I. Lieberman, I-Conn., and Susan Collins, R-Maine, to save the Washington voucher program is successful. The senators announced recently that they would seek to authorize continuation of the program in an amendment to existing legislation in the Senate, although the exact vehicle is not yet clear.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, the former CEO of the Chicago public schools, told a gathering of principals last July that he does not favor government-sponsored vouchers because they "pull out one to two percent of children but leave the other 99 percent to drown. As a federal government, we have to be more ambitious than that."

### Florida Optimism

Back in Florida, state Rep. Will Weatherford, the Republican who chairs the House education committee, is opti-

mistic that his bill to expand tax-credit vouchers will not only prevail, but also garner Democratic support. A companion measure in the state Senate has two Democratic co-sponsors.

Florida's tax-credit vouchers are currently worth \$3,950, while the average tuition and fees for the private schools that participate in the program come to roughly \$6,335, according to Step Up for Students. The program is serving roughly 25,000 low-income students statewide.

Mr. Weatherford's legislation would increase the vouchers' value, over four years, to 80 percent of the state's per-pupil funding amount at any given time, a figure that this year stands at about \$6,800. His bill also calls for more academic transparency in the voucher program: Any private school serving at least 30 voucher students would have to publicly disclose those students' academic performance on norm-referenced tests.

Roughly 80 percent of the 1,000 or so schools that participate in the tax-credit voucher program are affiliated with a church or other religious organization.

In an interview, Mr. Weatherford said he expects Democrats to support his legislation, especially after many of them voted in favor of a measure last year that was a more modest expansion of the tax-credit vouchers than the current bill.

"There are those who still think that the only way to educate kids is through public schools, and they will oppose this," he said. "But I'd say those times are gone. We've built some real momentum here with this program, and this year really presents us with an opportunity to push the envelope even more."

But Mark Pudlow, a spokesman for the Florida Education Association, is skeptical about the Democratic appetite for this particular measure.

"What we are talking about with this bill is a much bigger expansion of vouchers," he said. "And with many of our lawmakers increasingly frustrated by the loss of funding and support for fixing our public schools, I'm not so sure all of them will want to vote for this."

At the same time, Mr. Pudlow said, some Democrats have become more sympathetic to vouchers because of their popularity with some constituents. The problem with that position, he said, "is that it only fixes the problem, if you believe that private schools are the fix, for a select number of students."