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## Plan bumps up vouchers

Florida lawmakers propose bigger school voucher amounts for low-income students.

BY RON MATUS  
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About 25 of the 70 students at Gulf Coast Christian School in St. Petersburg have a big chunk of their tuition paid for by taxpayers, courtesy of a private-school voucher that's worth \$3,950.

Plenty of other families want to enroll, but they can't afford the

difference between the voucher and tuition, which ranges from \$4,650 to \$5,500.

"That's a frequent thing people say: 'I can't afford the rest of it,'" said principal Linda Smock.

Some lawmakers want that to change. And soon.

Under a comprehensive bill filed Wednesday — and with fair

odds of getting bipartisan support — Florida lawmakers are poised to consider a dramatic expansion of the state's voucher program for low-income students, including upping the voucher's value.

Over four years, the value would grow to be 80 percent of the state's per-pupil funding

figure and then automatically increase or decrease in tandem with the state rate.

At the current per-pupil rate of \$6,866, the voucher amount would grow to \$5,492.

"There's no doubt in my mind that public schools will always be the predominant way (of educating students), but that doesn't

mean parents shouldn't have a choice," said Rep. Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, the bill's sponsor. "All we're doing is empowering parents who come from a lower socioeconomic status."

At issue are tax-credit vouchers, one of three voucher programs championed by former Gov. Jeb  
» See VOUCHERS, 8A

» VOUCHERS continued from 1A

## Bill boosts size of school voucher

Bush and approved by a Republican-led Legislature. They're only available to students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. And they're funded by corporations that get dollar-for-dollar tax credits in return for contributions to them.

Weatherford's bill offers more incentives to corporations to contribute and essentially removes a cap on how much they can collectively give.

It also includes accountability measures, including financial reporting requirements for private schools that receive voucher money and school-by-school disclosure of standardized test scores for voucher students.

Critics still don't like it.

The accountability measures don't go far enough, they said. And the rest of the bill will further erode state support for public schools.

"This appears to be a gigantic expansion of vouchers in Florida," said Rep. Marty Kiar, D-Parkland.

"We're taking children out of the public schools and making them weaker," said Rep. Frederica Wilson, D-Miami. "That's not America."

But another Democratic lawmaker, Rep. Darryl Rouson, D-St. Petersburg, said it's likely that the bill will draw Democratic support. Last year, about half of the House Democrats voted to expand the funding pool for the tax-credit program.

Rouson said the range of this year's bill may give those cross-over Democrats "some pain and some pause," because they don't want to undermine public schools. But he predicted that many of them, like him, will con-



DANIEL WALLACE | Times

**Mary Lynne Duet teaches a class at Tampa Bay Christian Academy in Tampa. The school has 42 students on tax-credit vouchers, a program lawmakers have proposed expanding.**

clude it's not doing that — and that they can't deny growing constituencies in their districts who say vouchers are helping their kids.

"I don't think it's a slam dunk," Rouson said. "But I do believe we (Democrats) have seen value and we have seen successes" with vouchers.

In 2006, the Florida Supreme Court struck down the state's first and smallest voucher program, Opportunity Scholarships. But tax-credit scholarships remain intact and grow more popular every year.

Since 2004, the number of tax-credit vouchers is up from 10,549 to 24,871. About 2,500 students are in Pinellas, Hillsborough, Pasco and Hernando counties. About 70 percent of them are minorities.

Forty-two of them attend Tampa Bay Christian Academy in Tampa. School officials there say there's no doubt they'll be taking in more if the Legislature

increases the voucher amount. For students in K-5, the academy charges \$5,429 for tuition, fees and books.

"This would make a huge difference," said admissions officer Ana Lopez. "We really need this to happen."

It won't without a fight.

Opponents say vouchers drain money from public schools, even though it costs less to give a student a voucher than to educate him in public school. By some estimates, the total cost of educating a student in public school in Florida is more than \$11,000, once federal money and construction costs are factored in.

Kiar, the South Florida Democrat, took particular exception to how the bill would automatically increase the voucher amount and all but eliminate the contributions cap. Now, both the voucher amount and the cap — currently \$118 million — can't be changed without legislative approval.

"If it's going up (automatically), you don't have the Legislature vetting what the economic conditions are at the time," Kiar said. "That's very irresponsible and could have a potentially devastating impact on our education system."

Voucher supporters counter that it's unfair to cap the tax-credit program when other state-backed, school choice programs — such as vouchers for disabled students — do not have one.

They characterized the bill's disclosure requirements as a trade-off.

Private schools are "just realizing that if they're going to be participating in the program, there should be accountability that comes with that," Weatherford said.

"That's not a problem with me," said Smock, the St. Petersburg principal. "My books are open to anyone who wants to look at them." The same goes for test scores, she said.

But critics said it's still not acceptable for public schools to be rated on FCAT scores, while private schools are not. Voucher students must take a comparable standardized test, but even reporting those scores school by school is not enough, said Pinellas School Board member Carol Cook.

Without that comparison, more parents may be driven by the perception that private schools are better, Cook said. And as a School Board member in a district with shrinking enrollment, she said, "that potential concerns me."

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