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# State lawmakers may consider expansion of voucher program

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Some Treasure Coast students are getting their private school education partially paid for with public dollars.

And some state lawmakers are hoping to increase the state voucher program, which gives low-income families \$3,950 to help pay for qualifying private or parochial schools.

Voucher programs help supplement the financial aid program at St. Edward's School in Vero Beach, said the school's spokeswoman Elizabeth Thomason.

A few students at the school qualify for the state voucher, she said. If the state expands the program, the school might see a few more applicants, she said.

The amount of the voucher would determine how much of an impact it would make on St. Edward's and other independent schools, Thomason said.

Redeemer Lutheran School Principal Jim Ettig in Stuart said he wished the \$3,950 voucher amount was a little higher.

The state voucher helps a few of the school's students attend, he said.

"They probably wouldn't be here if they didn't have it," Ettig said.

A few hundred more dollars might benefit a few more students, Ettig said.

Some lawmakers also want the voucher's amount to change.

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.

But not everyone is in favor of the voucher idea.

"There is no credible data that says there is any gain in student achievement in a voucher school than regular public schools," said St. Lucie County Schools Superintendent Michael Lannon. "I see this political action as merely an unsupported attack on public schools. Ultimately, it is a way of segregating populations of children along economic lines and further reducing the public support in educating all children in America."

Bill sponsors say the bill helps give parents a choice.

"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 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.

(Ron Matus of the St. Petersburg Times contributed to this report.)