State lawmakers may consider expansion of voucher program

By COLLEEN WIXON  
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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.

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.)