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## Vouchers win mom over

**T**he Florida Legislature is poised to consider a controversial bill to expand the corporate tax credit scholarship program. It would increase the voucher amount, offer more incentives to corporations to contribute, and all but eliminate the cap on overall contributions. It also would require that many private schools accepting vouchers follow financial reporting requirements and disclose how voucher students scored (on average) on standardized tests. ¶ Shannon Coates, a St. Petersburg mom who uses the program for her fifth-grade daughter, Taylor Barnes, talked with *St. Petersburg Times* reporter Jeff Solochek about why she supports vouchers and their growth.

### How did you learn about the program?

I learned about it from the principal of her original school that she went to for kindergarten. ... I never thought about private school, to be honest with you. My mom is a public school educator. I went through the public school system. And when my daughter was going to kindergarten they had the choice program. ... I looked online to learn about the schools, I went and visited several schools to see which ones I wanted to be my top choices. And sad to say I didn't get any of my choices. That's when I got concerned about my public school choices.

### So then somebody said to you, you should consider this other option?

Right. Actually, a friend of mine. She came to me and she said, You know, my kids go to a private school ... it's called Yvonne C. Reed Christian School. Why don't you go talk to Mrs. Reed ... and let her know what is going on and see if they still have a kindergarten opening. And so I went, I talked to Mrs. Reed and she gave the prices and ... I said, 'I really can't afford to pay this.' And she said, Well, here's an application. There's a scholarship program, Florida Pride, Step Up For Students. So I applied for the scholarship and I got it, and she's been on it ever since. And it's the best thing that ever happened.

### What do you think about the people who criticize the use of state money, tax money, for this purpose?



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**Shannon Coates couldn't get her daughter, Taylor Barnes, into any of five school choices for kindergarten. A scholarship to the Yvonne C. Reed Christian School has been "the best thing that ever happened."**

Well, first of all, I mean they have to look at the statistics. Honestly, it is saving the state money. We're only getting \$3,950. And for some parents we're still paying over that. Because some of the schools that we've chosen for our kids are a little more expensive than the \$3,950 that we're getting. So we're still struggling. Because we care about our children's education, we're willing to struggle and make sacrifices to pay that extra money to get the best education that we feel is possible for them.

### Do you think that the idea to expand the program to more families and perhaps even a larger amount is a good thing?

Oh, it would be an awesome thing. I mean, to be able to know that more kids can benefit from this, more parents can realize it's really up to them. Because who knows the kids better than the parents? Nobody can tell me anything about my daughter that I don't already know. ... So I'm the one to know what education is going to be best for her, what school she is

going to succeed the best at.

### Your daughter is in fifth grade. Next year comes middle school. What are your plans?

They go through eighth grade, thank God. So she'll stay where she's at. She's looking forward to it. ... What's great about this school she's at is they offer everything that I got in the public school system. ... They have the band, chorus, art program. They have clubs. Everything. And, so, what is she really missing out on?