

Full steam ahead for school voucher expansion

By **KATHLEEN HAUGHNEY**
News Service of Florida

THE CAPITAL, TALLAHASSEE — A panel of lawmakers gave the green light Tuesday to a big expansion of a state voucher program that gives low-income students an opportunity to attend private schools.

The Senate Finance and Tax Committee passed SB 2126, which would allow more students to apply for the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program. The program provides 25,000 low income Florida students with a \$3,950 voucher to attend a private school. The money comes from businesses, which get a corporate tax credit in exchange.

The vote on the bill was 4-1, with Sen. Charlie Justice, D-St. Petersburg, the lone “no” vote.

Sen. Joe Negron, R-Stuart, who is sponsoring the measure, said that he believes all parents should have the right to choose which school their children to go to regardless of income and the available public school.

“They’re not your children,” he said to other members of the committee. “They don’t belong to you. They don’t belong to the public.”

The program, established in 2001, has long been capped at \$118 million. Under the proposal, the limit would

expand to \$150 million and then expand by 25 percent whenever the donations reach 90 percent of the cap.

It would also expand the types of tax credits that donors could get, allowing for scholarship credits for donors who pay oil and gas severance taxes, beverage taxes on alcohol and other types of business taxes.

Former Gov. Jeb Bush was a major proponent of vouchers, but his initial program, which directly used state money for private schools, including some religious institutions, was struck down by the Florida Supreme Court. The state teachers’ union and Florida Parent Teacher Association have been fervently opposed to vouchers, arguing that they take money away from public schools.

“We believe that all public schools should be improved,” said Latha Krishnaiyer, representing the PTA. “The money that you’re using, the money you’re taking away should be used to improve all public schools.”

State economists determined last week that the additional tax credits authorized by the bill would reduce state general revenue collections by \$31 million in fiscal year 2010-2011 with a recurring reduction of \$228.8 million.

But Negron and other bill supporters say that the state would have to pay more if all private school students went to public schools. The scholarship currently doles out \$3,950 per student, but the per pupil funding provided by the state to public schools is \$6,873. Under the legislation, the award per student would increase so it was 80 percent of the per pupil funding at public schools.

The legislation would also require private schools with scholarship recipients to follow new accountability measures. Schools receiving more than \$250,000 in scholarship funds would have to provide stricter accounting of the money. It would also require independent organizations to report and analyze learning gains of scholarship recipients and compare them to public school students.

The measure is now before the Senate Ways and Means Committee. The House version, HB 1009, has been referred to the House Finance and Tax committee, but it has not yet had a hearing.

Voting for the measure in Finance and Tax on Tuesday were Sens. Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton, Jeremy Ring, D-Boca Raton, Ronda Storms, R-Tampa and Thad Altman, R-Viera.

