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## Senate bills would reduce Bright Futures scholarships, boost private school vouchers

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TALLAHASSEE — A Florida Senate panel on Tuesday approved a second year of cutbacks for the popular Bright Futures scholarships, citing declining tax collections.

But just down the hall in the Capitol, another Senate committee approved cutting tax collections further to help pay for a massive expansion of a different kind of "scholarship" — one that gives corporations tax credits for the contributions they make to a program that gives poor children vouchers to help pay for private school tuition.

"It's sadly ironic," said Sen. Dan Gelber, D-Miami Beach, a member of the Senate Higher Education Appropriations Committee considering the Bright Futures changes. "Floridians want our schools funded and fixed, not privatized."

Bright Future scholarships, which pay for tuition at private and public colleges in Florida, would be more difficult for students to obtain and would pay for fewer credit hours under the Senate budget proposal. A Republican proposal in the House wouldn't change either of those things, but it would cut all scholarships by 9 percent.

Senate Higher Education Appropriations Chairwoman Evelyn Lynn, R-Ormond Beach, said Florida's finances are so poor that the state has no choice but to cut the program.

"Do we want to save Bright Futures and make some changes so we can keep it, or do we want to eliminate it all together? That's the position we're in," she said.

The voucher proposal, meanwhile, would cut tax revenue by increasing tax credits for Florida corporations.

Opponents say that would effectively divert money from public schools, but Sen. Joe Negron, the Stuart Republican sponsoring the bill (SB 2126), said, "In education, there should be choices."

The bill, which was approved 4-1 by the Senate Finance and Tax Committee and has two more committees to face, would increase the tax credits awarded during the 2010-11 school year by 18 percent to \$140 million and allow them to grow an additional 25 percent each following year if the demand for the vouchers is great enough.

That demand could grow because the bill would increase eligibility to remain in the program from 200 percent to 230 percent of the federal poverty level. That means a student from a family of four with an income of \$50,517 would be eligible for a voucher under the proposed changes. To enroll, a family's income must be 185 percent of the poverty level or lower.

The size of the voucher for students would increase, too. Now \$3,950, or about 57 percent of what the state pays per public school pupil, the amount under the bill would increase to \$4,120 next year.

It also would let businesses apply the credit to a wider array of taxes, such as liquor and some sales taxes, instead of only corporate income and insurance premium taxes.

While supporters said poorer children should have an opportunity to go to private schools, including religious

schools, public school teachers pointed out that students who use the voucher to attend private schools are not required to take the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, which the state requires for graduation from a public school.

"If we're going to demand that of our public school students, we certainly ought to demand that of the private schools that are getting public money to educate these kids," said Lynda Russell, a Florida Education Association lobbyist.

Negron, however, said voucher students still had to take the norm-referenced test. Those scores are reported to an independent research group, but there is no penalty if the test scores are poor. The University of Florida analyzed the first two years of test scores and concluded there was no change in test scores for students who transferred from public to private school, but said more study was needed.

The teachers union also criticized the tax-credit vouchers for creating a second "parallel" school system. The Florida Supreme Court used similar language in 2006 to strike down the Opportunity Scholarships for students of failed schools, one of the state's three voucher programs.

The corporate tax-credit vouchers, which so far have escaped constitutional challenge, give businesses a dollar-for-dollar tax credit against their state taxes in return for donations to the voucher program. It has more than doubled in size, to 27,700 students, since Opportunity vouchers were declared unconstitutional.