

THE TAMPA TRIBUNE

LIFE. PRINTED DAILY.

Published Wednesday, March 17, 2010

Bill increasing voucher money passes Senate committee

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TALLAHASSEE - A bill that would increase the amount of tax money paying for vouchers so poor children can attend private schools passed a key committee in the state Senate today.

Currently, poor children can apply for vouchers of \$3,960 a year to attend a private school. The money comes from tax credits against corporate income taxes and taxes paid on insurance premiums.

Under bills advancing through both houses of the Legislature, the voucher amount would rise from the current 60 percent of state per-pupil

spending to 80 percent. The public school per-pupil figure does not include federal and construction funding.

The bill would also increase the current overall spending cap on the program, called the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, from \$118 million to \$140 million. That amount would be allowed to climb by 25 percent whenever the tax credits approved the previous year reach or exceed 90 percent of the cap.

The increase would be paid for by extending the tax credits to excise taxes on alcoholic beverages, oil and gas severance taxes and taxes that certain dealers self-report and pay in

lump payments.

The bill would also, for the first time, disclose student progress on tests at private schools that have at least 30 voucher students.

One of the chief criticisms of the scholarship program since it was created eight years ago was that voucher students don't have to take the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test as public school students are required to do. The bill would not require voucher students to take the FCAT, but would disclose their scores on tests given at private schools.

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