

## Private schools have fewer students, public schools more

By **BRANDON LARRABEE**  
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TALLAHASSEE - Even as the Legislature debates a proposal that could expand access to a scholarship program for private school vouchers, a decline in attendance at nonstate schools and the resulting increase in attendance at public schools is putting more pressure on a budget spread thin by lagging tax revenues.

The implications of the voucher program for a budget facing a shortfall of as much as \$3 billion isn't often discussed. Opponents are more likely to speak about the proposal's potential to drain dollars from public education.

But Sen. Steve Wise, a Jacksonville Republican who heads the Senate panel overseeing public education spending, had a simple answer when asked whether he hoped expanding the voucher program might help the budget.

"Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes," he said. "And that's the piece nobody wants to talk about."

Private school enrollment has been falling for almost five years now, according to reports from the Florida Department of Education. The number of students attending those institutions has dropped from a high of 381,346 students in 2003-04 to 321,211 in the last school year, with 28,000 of those students shed since 2006-07. In the past three years, private schools have gone from educating 11.6 percent of the state's students to 10.9 percent.

Some of the blame is being placed on the national economy, which took a particularly abrupt nosedive in 2008.

"I'm not aware of any private agency that's seen an increase, and if there has been, it hasn't been a significant increase," said Howard Burke, president of the Florida Association of Academic Nonpublic Schools. "I think that's a national trend."

Last year also was the second time in the past four years in which the number of private schools declined.

That's at least in part because hard economic times put pressure on schools in addition to the parents who send their children there, Burke said. He said schools often increase financial aid to try to keep students.

A number of private schools also are deciding to become charter schools, which receive public funding but aren't bound by all of the rules followed by most public schools.

"There are a lot of those right now in the process," said Burke, who also serves as the executive director of the Florida Association of Christian Colleges and Schools.

At the same time, public enrollment is growing, including an increase of 10,000 students this year after state projections showed rolls shrinking by 1,000 students, Wise said. Public attendance is expected to jump by another 19,000 in the coming school year.

To be sure, private school losses aren't the only reason public enrollment is growing. The state is expecting more students from other countries, and Wise said refugees from January's devastating earthquake in Haiti account for about 9,000 of the new students.

However the students enroll, the result is that the same pie must be divided among more people.

"When they come in, what happens is your basic student allocation goes down," Wise said.

Meanwhile, lawmakers are debating an expansion of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program, which allows corporations and insurance companies to get tax credits for contributing to organizations that provide private-school scholarships.

The bill would increase the cap on tax

credits from \$118 million to \$140 million while allowing the cap to rise again when credits in any year hit 90 percent of the total allowed; boosts the average scholarship award from \$3,950 a year to eventually 80 percent of state per-student funding; and increases eligibility for the award, though higher-income students would get smaller scholarships.

Unlike overall private school enrollment, some scholarship programs are growing. One of the organizations, Step Up for Students, says its enrollment has grown by an average of 22.4 percent a year over the past five years.

"Why are we expanding this?" said Sen. Joe Negron, R-Palm City and the bill's sponsor, at a Friday meeting where the Senate Ways and Means Committee sent the bill to the full chamber. "Because there's a demand for it."

Opponents counter that the program drains money away from public education for schools that haven't proven to be any more effective.

"This program has expanded at lightning speed over the last few years with really no data to support it," said Lynda Russell, a lobbyist for the Florida Education Association, the state's main teachers union.

Meanwhile, Burke is among those hoping that an increase in the number and size of the scholarships will boost private enrollment.

"I think it will help, ultimately, when the economy turns around - if they can fully fund that," he said.

And Wise and his colleagues have to account for more students in the public schools with a plan that slices after-school and some other programs to boost the main school funding formula by about \$15 a student.

"We just have to suck it up," he said. "And that's what we've done in this budget."