

School Reform News

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Voucher expansion bill passes Florida House

By Rick Docksai

BREAKING NEWS:

Florida's House of Representatives on Thursday passed a bill to expand the state's private school voucher program for low income students. The measure, Senate Bill 2126, passed 95-23 with solid Republican support. The legislation now heads to Gov. Charlie Crist (R), who is expected to sign it.

School-choice supporters in most states expect fierce opposition from the Democratic Party and public schools. But in Florida a surprising number of Democratic lawmakers and public-school teachers are among those backing a bill by State Rep. Will Weatherford (R-Wesley Chapel) to expand the state's school-voucher program.

"People realize we're part of the public educational system. We're the part that helps teachers fulfill one of their most basic missions, which is the promise of educational equality," said Jon East, research and communications director of Step Up For Students, a nonprofit organization that distributes scholarships to low-income students for enrollment in private schools.

Businesses Get Tax Benefit

In 2001, Florida launched a Tax Credit Scholarship program to fund private-school scholarships for children from low-income families. The state promised any corporate contribution to nonprofits that fund private-school scholarships would bring a full dollar-for-dollar tax credit.

The scholarships may total \$3,950 per student. This year, 25,000 students have scholarships through the program, a big leap from the nearly 16,000 students the program served during the 2002-2003 school year.

East said when the state legislature first voted on the program in 2001, only one Democrat voted in favor. In 2009, however, a vote to expand the state's allocation for the program to \$118 million a year received "yea" votes from 21 of 44 Democrats in the Assembly, including a majority of the Black Caucus and the entire Hispanic Caucus.

"School choice is an option for low-income students who have so few educational options, and I think Democrats see that," said East.

Raises State Aid

Weatherford's legislation (HB1009) would raise the state's contribution to \$140 million and allow for more increases down the road if demand grows further: Any time 90 percent of the cap is reached, the limit would rise by another 25 percent.

The bill would also index the scholarships to 80 percent of public-school per-student spending. According to East, the scholarships currently stand at only 57 percent of public-school per-student spending. This will allow for significant growth in the scholarship amount over time.

"Basically it's saying that the program should be allowed to meet demand. If more families want to be in the program, this will allow that," said East. "The cap continues to increase as long as demand is there."

Senate Version Approved

Florida's Senate on March 24 passed its version of Weatherford's bill by a 27-11 margin. SB 2126, by Sen. Joe Negron (R-Palm City), had two prominent black Democrats among its cosponsors: Gary Siplin (D-Orlando) and Alfred Lawson Jr. (D-Tallahassee).

Siplin and Lawson were among the four Democratic Senators who voted for the bill's passage.

In the Florida House of Representatives, State Rep. Bill Heller (D-St. Petersburg), is among the cosponsors of Weatherford's bill. Heller was a public-school teacher before becoming a state representative. In a commentary in the March 10 edition of the Miami Herald, Heller defended his support for school choice based in part on his firsthand experience in a predominantly low-income school with special-needs students.

"I know better than most the challenge we face with children who come to school from homes where the rent is paid at the expense of food on the kitchen table," Heller wrote. "That's why I can't accept a

form of politics that would deny children any reasonable opportunity we can give them."

Teachers, Others Rally in Favor

Some public-school teachers are also strongly in favor of school vouchers. A rally of 5,521 school-choice supporters gathered outside the State Capitol on March 24. Among them were members of a group of 38 public-school teachers, the Coalition of Hispanic Instructors in Support of Parental Awareness (CHISPA).

"At the end of the day, what they as teachers believe in is the child and the success of the child, whether that child graduates from their school or someone else's school," said Julio Fuentes, CEO of CHISPA.

Fuentes addressed oft-heard criticism that it is counterintuitive for public-school teachers to support private voucher programs. Teachers unions often contend vouchers cost public schools students and resources, but Fuentes said he reached common ground with his group's teachers by showing them how vouchers can benefit their students.

"We basically made the message clear as possible that the ultimate goal is to have the child graduate," said Fuentes. "Teachers aren't teachers to become millionaires. They are passionate about what they do. And what they do is help students."

Hope for Reducing Disruption

Fuentes said many of his group's members spoke at the rally and attested their own classrooms could benefit from vouchers. Several teachers noted how children who struggle in class often disrupt other students.

"But if the struggling student's parents can move him or her to another school that can teach better, that student and the class as a whole both win," Fuentes recounted.

"If you have a child that's disruptive, that's not benefitting the class. The teacher will argue that if the child will benefit from the choice of a different environment better suited to him or her, so be it," Fuentes said. *Rick Docksai writes from Washington, DC.*

