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## Vouchers linked to school gains

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Competition from private-school vouchers has led to small academic improvements in Florida's public schools, a new study concludes.

After the state began offering tax-credit vouchers to low-income students in 2001, students in public schools with a greater and more diverse array of private schools around them showed greater gains in standardized test scores than students in other public schools, found David Figlio and Cassandra Hart at Northwestern University.

The gains were about one-third to one-half the size of the gains associated with large reductions in class size. They were biggest for elementary and middle schools, and for schools at risk of losing grant money that is tied to the proportion of low-income students they have.

Figlio emphasized the boost was significant, but modest.

"Anybody looking for a silver bullet has to keep looking," he said. "What we find is certainly positive and statistically strong, but it's not like public schools are revolutionizing overnight because of this, either."

The findings will give fresh ammunition to voucher supporters, who pushed through the biggest voucher expansion

in Florida history this spring.

"Our main focus is to provide learning options to low-income families who could not otherwise afford them," John Kirtley, the Tampa businessman who is the driving force behind tax-credit vouchers, said in a written statement. "But it thrills us to see traditional public schools improving, as well."

Voucher opponents, though, said the latest study isn't enough to overcome other problems they see with vouchers.

"This is a drop in the bucket in the larger debate," said Rep. Dwight Bullard, D-Miami. "I've told voucher supporters if public education is being funded properly, you wouldn't have this argument with me."

Figlio and Hart's findings are expected to be released next week by the National Bureau of Economic Research.

Figlio is a former University of Florida economics professor whose work is highly regarded by all sides of the voucher debate. Last year, in a study ordered by the Legislature, he found students using tax-credit vouchers are doing no better or worse academically than similar students in public schools.

Tax-credit vouchers, which were worth \$3,950 last year, are eligible to students whose families meet the income require-

ments for free or reduced-price lunch. Last year, 27,700 students used them.

Figlio and Hart analyzed FCAT scores from 2000 to 2007 but looked particularly closely at data from the 2001-02 school year. That's the school year after former Gov. Jeb Bush signed the tax-credit voucher program into law in 2001, but before students began receiving tax-credit vouchers in fall 2002.

To estimate the competitive pressure on public schools, the researchers looked at how many private schools were nearby and what types of schools they were. The more schools and the more variety, the more pressure to improve, they surmised. And that's what happened.

Another researcher remained skeptical. Stanford labor economist Martin Carnoy, who has studied the impact of vouchers, said Figlio and Hart did "an honest job with the data."

"But here is the real story: Even after several years the effect size is TINY," he wrote in an e-mail.

The findings come as Florida gears up for an expansion in vouchers thanks to new legislation that will raise the value of individual vouchers over several years. If growth trends continue, 70,000 students could be using vouchers by 2015.