

The program's popularity forces administrators to end the application period early, despite more funding.

Voucher demand exceeds supply



Christina Tiberio's son Timothy, 5, attends Sacred Heart Interparochial School on a voucher. "I was brought up in a Catholic school, and I want the same for my children."

BY SYLVIA LIM
Times Correspondent

The state's voucher program for low-income students is signing up more students — and getting more cash — just months after lawmakers approved an aggressive expansion.

The program stopped accepting new applications on Friday after receiving 5,671 more than last year and nearing its funding cap, said Jon East, spokesman for Step Up For Students, the Tampa-based group that administers the voucher program.

Families who want to renew their vouchers have until Oct. 1 to reapply.

The decision to limit new applications comes just two months after the new provisions for

the corporate tax-credit scholarships went into effect. Passed this summer, the legislation boosted the value of each voucher low-income students use to attend local private schools. It also removed caps for corporate donations.

Corporations have already pledged \$97.5 million to the voucher fund so far, with the biggest increase coming from alcoholic beverage distributors. Their contributions make up a third of the voucher program's funding so far, East said in an e-mail.

That's in part because they have to pay taxes monthly, he said. The legislation opened three new revenue streams: the alcoholic beverage excise tax, the oil and gas severance tax and the direct pay self-accrual sales tax typically levied

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Voucher program popular

on manufacturers.

"The majority of our contributing companies are repeat supporters," he wrote.

Ron Meyer, an attorney for the Florida Education Association, called the expansion of the vouchers wrongheaded.

The provisions are diverting much-needed revenue for the state — and public schools — amid tough economic times, he said.

"We think it's just wrong that corporations are not paying their taxes and are instead, supporting vouchers for private schools," said Meyer, who represented voucher opponents in the *Bush vs. Holmes* case in 2006. The Florida Supreme Court found the Florida Opportunity Scholarships Program unconstitutional and shuttered it, he said.

Last school year, vouchers worth up to \$3,950 each were doled out to 28,927 students from a \$118 million fund.

This year, the fund has increased to \$140 million with each voucher worth about \$4,100. Because of another provision in the legislation and the number of applicants this year, the fund could increase in 2011-12 to \$170 million.

In addition to more students and more money, the program has more schools participating — from 1,033 last school year to 1,259 this year, East said.

Christina Tiberio, a Largo resident, heard about the voucher expansion through the principal at Sacred Heart Interparochial School in Pinellas Park. The school has a link to the voucher program on its website.

Tiberio followed developments on the voucher expansion legislation through her church newsletter and signed up as soon as she could.

Her oldest son Timothy, 5, recently started kindergarten at Sacred Heart. "I know the public school he would have gone to is a good school," said Tiberio, 27, a single mom of three. But "I was brought up in a Catholic school, and I want the same for my children."

Hugo Jordan cited similar reasons for sending his 5-year-old daughter Nicole to St. Cecilia Interparochial Catholic School in Clearwater.

She attended the school's prekindergarten program on a discounted tuition, but full tuition at the school is too much for the family, said Jordan, 37.

The school sent him brochures about the voucher program and the family applied successfully.

Q&A | Vouchers

What did the bill do?

It significantly increased the value of each voucher, removed caps on how much corporations can donate and mapped out accountability measures, such as standardized test scores and financial accounting to the state if a school receives more than \$250,000 in voucher revenue.

How much is each voucher worth?

Each is worth \$4,106 for the 2010-11 school year. The value will rise over several years until it reaches 80 percent of the state's per-pupil funding, which is currently \$6,843.51.

What do they pay for?

Tuition and books. Eligible students can get up to \$500 for transportation if their school is outside their district.

Who's eligible?

Students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunches based on their parents' income. For example, a household of two people whose gross income is less than \$2,247 a month may be eligible. Students also must have attended public school for a year before application, except for kindergartners and first-graders.

Sources: Step Up For Students, the Florida Department of Education, Times files

By the numbers

Enrollment

10,549 students in 2004-05.
28,927 in 2009-10.
34,598 as of September 2010.

Schools

973 in 2004-05.
1,033 in 2009-10.
1,259 as of September 2010.

For his shy daughter, who has flourished at the school, it was the best possible outcome.

"We got the good news that she would be able to stay in the same school," said Jordan. "We know there is good education there, which is our priority for sending her there."