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

Voucher demand exceeds supply

Christina Tibero'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 2,671 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 $87.5 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 creates 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 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 voucher program "a significant expansion of the voucher program, which will likely lead to more private schools being open to voucher students." He added that the program "will also likely lead to more tax revenue for the state and local governments."