Families vouch for program

Parents are grateful for the help in sending their children to private schools. Participation is rising.

BY TONY MARRERO
Times Staff Writer

SPRING HILL — It's just a spelling quiz, but God is still top of mind in Room 10 at West Hernando Christian School.

Teacher Suzanne Evans sits at her desk in the small, low-ceilinged classroom in a portable building on the Osowaw Boulevard campus. Twenty or so first-graders, including a dirty-blond-haired boy named Jack Pasmore, hunch over their tiny desks, pencils at the ready.

Evans reads the next word, "were," and then uses it in a sentence: "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?"

Jack and his classmates get to work.

It's a timely example, two days before Good Friday. The classroom walls are adorned with colorful placards on the same theme: In Christ, all things are made new, reads one. Jesus is alive, proclaims another.

These are the telltale signs of the faith-based education that Jeff and Kimberly Pasmore say they are glad their son is able to receive — and that they wouldn't be able to afford without the help they get from the state. The missionaries from Spring Hill have a meager income, but use the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program to cover the roughly $3,000 annual tuition.

"We were blessed to put him right in," Jeff Pasmore said. "It's like a second home. It really is.

The program uses donations from Florida corporations to give tuition assistance to families with low incomes who want to send their children to private school. A donating corporation receives a dollar-for-dollar tax credit of up to 75 percent of its state income tax liability.

Students get a flat stipend of up to 80 percent of the state’s per-pupil funding for public schools. That came out to $3,950 for the current fiscal year.

Statewide, nearly 96 percent of students in the program use funding administered through the nonprofit Step Up For Students.

The number of Florida families using the tax credit scholarship program has steadily climbed since its inception in 2001, hitting nearly 33,000 earlier this year and reaching the program funding cap of $140 million. There are currently about 6,000 students on the waiting list.

The trend is the same in Hernando, where enrollment has more than tripled in recent years.

In 2006, 61 students were attending Hernando private schools with the help of a Step Up voucher. Last June, the number was 195, accounting for about $695,000 in tuition aid.

As of last week, 217 students were using Step Up vouchers at seven Hernando schools.

A second voucher program called the McKay Scholarship also has grown in popularity here, though at a much slower rate. McKay gives tuition vouchers for students with disabilities to attend private schools. By the end of last school year, 76 Hernando students were enrolled, receiving more than $426,000 in aid.

Vouchers were initially used in Florida to give students in failing public schools the ability to pay for a better-performing private school. Created in 1999 under then-Gov. Jeb Bush, the so-called Opportunity Scholarship was the first of its kind in the nation, but in 2006 the Florida Supreme Court struck down the private school portion of the law, ruling it unconstitutional.

Now Florida lawmakers are considering several pieces of legislation aimed at increasing the number of tax dollars available for private education. One Senate bill that passed its first committee two weeks ago would make vouchers available to all, regardless of income.

As those proposals spark a familiar debate about using tax dollars to fund private school education, Hernando parents, students and private school administrators say vouchers are changing lives for the better.

One day last week, 8-year-old Ariana Blevins beam as she raced a few classmates around West Hernando Christian's basketball court during physical education class. She had already had Bible study for the day.

Ariana is happy and thriving on the close-knit campus of 270 students in pre-kindergarten to 12th grade, and so is her brother, Ethan, a kindergartener, said parents Daniel and Christine Blevins.

Chapel is held every Friday, parents take an active role and the older students are happy to help tend to the youngsters, the Blevinses said. Ariana and Ethan are both on the principal's list, but just as important, the firm moral foundation the parents set at home is strengthened at school, they said.

"If your school doesn't match up with home, they're going to lose what they learn at home," Christine Blevins said.

There is no way the family could pay the tuition without a Step Up voucher.

Daniel had been making good money building trade show exhibits for the aerospace industry, but then that work dried up. They had purchased a house in Hernando Beach in 2006 after his father got cancer before they sold their house in Virginia. Then the market crashed and they spent their savings struggling to carry two mortgages. They finally lost both properties.

They still live in Hernando Beach, in the home of a doctor who agreed to let them move into his vacant house in exchange for caretaker duties.

"The only thing consistent in our lives the last four years has been our children's education and our children's faith," Daniel Blevins said.

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Hernando families sing praises of vouchers

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The Blevinses acknowledged the athletic programs aren't as extensive as those in public
school, but that need can be met in club sports, they said.

Nikita Kostjukoff, an 18-year-old senior, didn't want to attend a small, faith-based school when she arrived at West Hernando Christian as a freshman on a Step Up voucher. But her affinity for the school grew, and so did her faith in God and in a private school education.

"You're not just a number," said Kostjukoff, now bound for a small Christian college in Hawaii.

During the recession, the voucher programs also have helped private schools by stemming the exodus of families who can no longer afford tuition.

West Hernando Christian has the most Step Up students in the county at 65, or roughly one-quarter of the school's student body.

"We look at it as a program that has truly blessed us and blessed families that want a Christian education," said school administrator Marti Covert.

Ken Alvaraz, superintendent of Hernando Christian Academy in Brooksville, agrees.

Of the school's 200 or so students, 64 are in one of the voucher programs. Tuition there ranges from $6,000 to $7,000, and though families can get additional financial aid through the school, they still have to pay something out of pocket, Alvarez said.

"The students have taken advantage of being here," he said.

Statewide, 79 percent of schools attended by students on Florida Tax Credit Scholarships are faith-based. Of the seven Hernando schools that participate, all but one — Wider Horizons in Spring Hill — is faith-based.

The school of about 155 students uses the Montessori method of teaching for students in kindergarten through sixth grade and a college preparatory curriculum for seventh through 12th grades. Tuition ranges from $3,600 to $6,900.

Before her divorce, Darlene Murray and her then-husband could afford the roughly $13,000 expense to send their sons, Tyler and Trevor, to Wider Horizons. The boys did well in the environment, where classes are small and hands-on group activities are a mainstay.

After the divorce, Murray moved the boys to the public school system.

"They were so far ahead of everyone else," said Murray, who lives in Spring Hill and works in the customer service division of a company that does background checks for state transportation workers. "Tyler was in advanced classes, and it still wasn't challenging enough. They lost a lot that year."

Murray found out she qualified for Step Up for Students, and the boys returned to Wider Horizons, though she still pays $500 a month to cover the balance of their tuition. Trevor is now in sixth grade, Tyler in ninth.

"I drive a '95 Honda that's falling apart just so I can keep the kids in there," she said.

As heartening as the success stories can be, dedicating public money for private schools undermines a critical effort, said Mark Pudlow, dedicating public money for private schools undermines a critical effort, said Mark Pudlow, superintendent of Hernando County Public Schools.

"Any time we spend tax dollars, we spend to ensure that student is getting the best education possible," Fasano said.

"Any voucher recipient pays property taxes or sales taxes or both, and deserve to have options, Maglio said. Ideally, all families would get a direct tax credit to use at the school of their choice, he said.

"That would be revolutionary," Maglio said.

"It would redistribute — and that's a good word since (President Barack) Obama's in — the resources to be better utilized."

Some state lawmakers think so, too.

Senate Bill 1150, proposed this session by Republican Sen. Joe Negron of Palm City, would create a so-called education savings account for all schoolchildren that would be equal to 40 percent of the state's per-pupil funding, or about $3,100 this year. Gov. Rick Scott has expressed support for the idea, but even top GOP lawmakers have said it's unlikely to go anywhere this year as Republicans focus on other policy issues.

Another bill this session would expand the list of conditions that qualify students for McKay scholarships.

Rep. Jimmie Smith, R-Inverness, who represents a portion of Hernando, said he's looking forward to sending his 3-year-old daughter to a nearby public school. But Smith also said he would be inclined to support a plan like Negron's for parents who wanted other options.

"It will cause our (public) school system to look inward and say, 'How can we make ourselves better and more competitive?" Smith said.

There is a fundamental flaw in that theory, said Hernando school superintendent Bryan Blavatt.

Public schools accept all children at the door. Private schools, by definition, can control admission and are able to spend resources as they see fit on a student body tailored to their liking, Blavatt said.

"I think competition's good, but it's kind of like Tampa trying to compete with the Yankees," he said.

State Sen. Mike Fasano, whose district includes about half of Hernando County, said Negron's bill goes too far.

Fasano, a New Port Richey Republican, supports the voucher programs as they are now — limited in scope but still a viable way to give families options. But he also said voucher students should be tested to make sure they're meeting the same standards as their public school peers.

"Any time we spend tax dollars, we spend to ensure that student is getting the best education possible," Fasano said.

That would be fine, said Tyler Miles, one of Darlene Murray's boys at Wider Horizons.

Students there take a similar standardized test, but teachers don't spend weeks or months teaching to it, Miles said.

"I have no problem taking the FCAT," he said.

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