Scholarship program growth sought

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Since its inception, Florida’s corporate tax credit scholarship program has proven both controversial and increasingly popular. The program, which provides vouchers for the state’s poorest students to attend private schools, has seen its waiting list grow alongside the line of corporations seeking to contribute.

So each year, Republican lawmakers have sought to expand the contribution cap, which in turn allows more students to participate. An increasing number of Democrats, meanwhile, have come to embrace the program, which serves many of their constituents.

Last year, Pasco County Republican Rep. Will Weatherford led the charge. This year, Pasco County Republican Rep. Richard Corcoran, R-New Port Richey, is carrying the legislation to grow the program, and he’s thrown in a few new ideas aimed at further shoring up support, such as creating a path to have voucher recipients take the FCAT so the public can see if the students are truly doing better at their private schools.

He’s also proposed giving the state Department of Education more power to penalize private schools that abuse the system.

Step Up For Students executive director Doug Tuthill said many private schools have asked for such reforms, to help prove they are doing a good job. Corcoran spoke with the Times about his legislation just before it won bipartisan support in its first committee stop in the House.

First, why are you looking to expand it at all?

We have a waiting list in (2011-12), it was about 8,000 students. In (2012-13), I think it’s about 10,000 students. So you have this huge waiting list. To the extent that we can get these children to be able to participate, and our extension now on our amended version only increases it by about 2,400 students over and above the additional 25 percentauthorized increase to the cap. And the program is working. Studies have come out saying that similarly situated students in the public school system vs. the people who are on the corporate tax scholarship, the corporate tax scholarship has shown—albeit marginal—have shown better increases in math and English scores.

Now I saw the legislation would also allow the schools that take the scholarships to take the state assessments. I read that as the FCAT. Is that correct?

That is correct.

That is the first time that would happen. What made you decide to add that, even if it is a “may” instead of a “shall”?

I believe in the FCAT. I think it’s a good measurement tool. I personally believe it’s a better measurement tool than the norm-referenced tests. This year my wife and I are home-schooling our kids, and we have signed our children up for the FCAT. I think it’s a good measurement tool, and it has been one of the most significant factors in seeing our school system statewide go from in the bottom 40 of the states to the top 5, see the great learning gains we’re seeing in minority students, see the great learning gains we’re seeing in disabled students. I think it’s a great measurement.

And to the extent we can have an apples to apples comparison, I would hope the private schools would look at this as an opportunity and say, ‘Now that we can take it, let’s go out there and take it and show people we are an excellent institution.’ That’s the way the market works. And if it does do that, you see so many studies from around the nation that when you have an apples to apples comparison, you have these programs and the additional competition … that rising tide raises all ships. And every student in all of our schools, from public to private, get a better education.

So why not require them to do it?

Well, you know, if I thought that in my early endeavor into this realm I could get that done, I would certainly look at it.

Couldn’t you put it in there and see what happens?

I don’t have to walk into a bar and go up to a 6 foot 6 guy who looks pretty mean and say, ‘You’re a piece of (junk) and I want to kick your butt’ to know what the consequences are going to be.

Gotcha. I see you also changed the amount (of the tax credit cap). Is that because of the fiscal (analysis)? I saw the fiscal was projecting a negative impact.

No. It was projecting a negative expenditure impact. But when you factor in the savings it was a positive impact. Just in the Senate version they increase it to $250 million. We put it at $229 million. We’ve got another several weeks of session. We’ll see if we can work it out.

Is that just a bargaining chip, then?

No. I have sat down and had great conversations with my Senate counterpart. I have the FCAT provisions in mine. I have additional authorization for the Department of Education to make the necessary changes to schools that are not in compliance. They don’t have those. It’s part of the process. Hopefully we’ll sit down and the two bodies will find a common ground.

Do you think this could derail the bill completely? Or is there enough room for compromise that this will definitely come out at the end?

I definitely think there is enough room to work it all out.

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