Finding the answer in private school

Bethany Wehrenberg teaches third-, fourth- and fifth-graders recently at Christ the King school in Palm Coast. Officials at the school, which is part of the Lutheran Church, say they are seeing an increase in the number of students using Florida’s tax credit scholarship program, which helps lower-income families pay for private schools.

More students using scholarships

By ANNIE MARTIN
EDUCATION WRITER

PALM COAST – When Christ the King school opened four years ago, teachers met with a small group of preschool students in a warehouse.

Two years later, the school was moved a mile down the road to its current campus on U.S. 1, where 220 children from 1-year-olds to eighth-graders meet in portable classrooms outside the church sanctuary.

First-year Principal Jeff Loberger calls the school a “hidden gem” in Flagler County, a “college prep” program that puts students on the path to a degree.

Like many private schools in Flagler and Volusia counties and throughout the state, a growing number of the school’s students attend on tax credit scholarships, which help low-income families pay for private schools. There are 99 Christ the King students on the scholarship, up from 43 last year and just 10 two years ago.

Across the country, enrollment in private schools is dropping as families struggle financially and tuition-free charter schools offer more students options beyond their traditional public schools. But Christ the King and other schools in Flagler and Volusia counties have found a renaissance through the state’s tax credit scholarship program.

MORE STUDENTS RECEIVE SCHOLARSHIPS

Now in its 11th year, the state’s tax credit scholarship program serves 48,280 Florida students, including 2,000 in Volusia and Flagler counties. Statewide, there are more than 10,000 students on a

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Private School Enrollment Data

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Students enjoy some time on the playground at Christ the King School recently in Palm Coast. The school, run by the Lutheran Church, is experiencing an increase in the number of students taking advantage of a tax credit that allows lower-income families to get help paying for private education. First-Principal Jeff Lobenger said his school is growing because parents see their children “loved and pushed” by teachers and staff members.

PRIVATE

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writing last, said Jon East, vice president of policy and public affairs for the group, which administers the scholarship program.

“Of course there are problems, but there are many reasons to look for this option right now,” East said.

The number of students using McKay scholarships, a voucher program for children with disabilities, is also increasing. More than 24,000 students received these scholarships last school year, up from 1,602 five years earlier. Step up for Students is funded by corporations that offer income tax, insurance premium tax, school property tax, direct pay sales, and oil or gas severance taxes. These companies can deduct a portion of their taxes to support organizations that award scholarships to students in kindergarten through 12th grade.

There are multiple reasons why the other programs are receiving so many scholarships this year. The program for children with special needs, for example, offers children in second grade and older to attend public schools for at least a year before they entered kindergarten. In 2013, lawmakers decided to increase the requirements for students as old as fifth grade.

Eligibility is based on the same income requirements as free and reduced-price lunch programs — $24,435 or less annually for a family of four — and the number of students who meet that criterion. There’s also more money available. The tax credit, which is capped, can grow by up to $120 per year, according to state law. This school year, that dollar amount increased by $120 million.

Last characterized the program as “a partnership with public education.”

Typically recipients are among the very best academic achievers, he said. Basically, this tax-inclusion option for kids whose current option is not working for them,” he said.

Father Lopez High School in Daytona Beach opened in August with 116 students and the school closed last spring, and the campus exceeded 116 students for the first time since 1985, President Mike O’Grady said. There are 24 students who attend using McKay scholarships this year, up from 30 last year. The number of students with McKay scholarships also increased from 11.

About 75 percent of Lopez students receive some form of public or private assistance, which is nearly $50,000, and “our student population here comes from all socioeconomic backgrounds,” he said.

“We don’t want a family’s financial means to be a reason for excluding somebody from our school,” O’Grady said.

About two-thirds of the state’s private schools accept Step up for Students scholarships, but there’s a few reasons why others don’t: The $4,350 award doesn’t cover the full cost of tuition, which averages more than $10,000 nationally, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. In that case, schools can ask families to provide additional funding. Schools also must administer standardized tests to schoolchildren, and schools that receive $10,000 or more must file yearly financial reports by an independent Certified Public Accountant.

“Private schools are public and independent for a reason,” East said. “This doesn’t want to participate in a government program.”

PRIVATE SCHOOLS SHINING NATIONALLY

While some local private schools are growing, private school enrollment nationally has fallen since 2005, when there were 5.4 million American children enrolled in private kindergartens through 12th-grade programs. By 2009, that number had fallen to 4.2 million, according to the U.S. Census.

“Typically when the economy is bad and household income is stressed, it also helps students afford the tuition associated with private education,” said Chris Colwell, director of undergraduate student education at Stetson University in DeLand.

Some local private schools are facing challenges that are strapped for cash. Flagler Christian Academy in Holly Hill, which is nearly two decades old, has about 58 students in its preschool through eighth-grade program, and just seven of those students are not in second grade and older.

“We’ve grown up and down over the years,” administrator Joyce Allee said. “A few years before the economic downturn, we were at about 100 kids.”

Private education is “on the back burner” for many families now, Allee said, “but the school added six students this year, she attributes the overall enrollment dip to the cost of tuition. Families pay $19,000 monthly, but even less than that many other private schools, but parents are also responsible for transportation.

Besides finances, many families choose to stick with the public schools because they’re happy there, Colwell said. At the older grade levels, the large public schools often offer more elective, extracurricular and athletic opportunities.

“Generally, customer satisfaction, if you will, remains very solid for public schools,” Colwell said.

Three-quarters of parents reported they are “completely satisfied,” or “somewhat satisfied,” with their oldest child’s education, according to Gallup, which polled parents nationwide in August. Of that group, 48 percent said their oldest child planned to attend a public school this year, while 11 percent still doubted their oldest child would attend a private school.

Because the Flaherty Christian Academy has so few students at each grade level, it relies on an unconventional model of instruction: Students sit at computers and watch videos of classes at Pensacola Christian Academy and then complete class work with guidance from an instructor.

But some parents fancy the simple individual attention for their children and many have asked Allee to add high school grades. It’s not feasible to do that, because “there’s too many things the state requires,” like science labs, she said. Most of her students are “torn and pushed,” by the school, she said.

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Parents seek family atmosphere

Many private school officials say parents are looking for a more intimate alternative to public schools, which typically enroll several hundred or thousands of students. Others want their children to learn about their culture during the day.

At Father Lopez, a new campus which opened in 2014 is a draw. But parents from about 30 different zip codes in Volusia, Flagler and Seminole counties also said their children at Father Lopez because it’s a well-established school that seeks to “educate the whole person.”

“I think good parenting is finding out what are the options,” O’Grady said. “There’s a lot of good options. We’re just one option.”

Sitting near the playground at Christ the King, at the end of a recent school day, Kevin St. Martin, a shareholder of Plant Coast, said Christ the King feels “like it’s a family.”

The school is also one of only a few that have a music teacher, the 6-year-old son of the principal, he said. “If something came up, they would drive my child, and I would be ok with that,” he said. He also appreciated the school’s emphasis on “learning about the world through music, writing and arithmetic.”

Pretoria Gates of Palm Coast, who has three young children who attend the school, also believes the school feels like a family. She said the school feels like “a family.”

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