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School voucher sees rapid growth

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SEBRING - Karla Carrillo's kids use a state-sponsored voucher-like program to attend a private school of their choice.

"Every parent wants to give their child the best education possible, but some are just unable to provide that due to their financial situation. These vouchers allow us to provide a better learning environment for our kids," she said.

Her boys have around 11 or 12 classmates in their grade at Lakeview Christian School. Her son, Marko, was taught cursive in kindergarten.

"I love it," she said in an email. "I hope that we will be able to qualify each year until all our kids graduate."

Carrillo is one of many parents availing of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program, funded by corporations who get tax credits for money they contribute, which Step Up for Students administers.

Step Up then uses those funds to essentially provide private-school vouchers to low-income students who qualify.

The program saw record enrollment in the 2012-13 school year statewide, and the number of Highlands County students using the program also was at its highest.

According to an annual report by the state Department of Education, the number of students grew by 10,827 in 2012-13, to 51,075, or almost 27 percent.

In Highlands County, 198 children were enrolled in Step Up, for a total dollar amount of \$806,060, according to a DOE June 2013 annual report. That number was up, compared to 118 students in 2009 and 36 in 2006.

Its growing popularity also means the percentage of students using voucher-like programs in local private schools has gone up significantly, almost to a third of the total student count in some places.

In 2012-13, 34 Highlands University Preparatory School students were awarded Step Up money. Ten others had the McKay Scholarships, another state-sponsored scholarship for private schools, this one for students with disabilities.

The McKay Scholarship, which is funded by the Florida Department of Education, is designed for students with disabilities

who have an Individual Education Plan or a 504 Accommodation Plan and also meet other criteria.

Collectively, the Highlands UPrep's McKay and Step Up students comprised 40 percent of the total student population of 112 last school year.

Walker Memorial Academy in Avon Park has seen the same kind of growth. In the 2012-13 school year, 70 of the 205 students were using Step Up money to pay tuition.

"We have seen quite a jump," said treasurer Teresa Gonzalez, who is expecting more students next year school as the program grows.

Private school officials say some parents switching from public to private schools are looking for smaller class sizes, others for a Christian education, and still others for a more controlled classroom atmosphere where there are fewer chances to intermingle with rowdy kids and a more disciplined approach.

Supporters also say this gives parents school choice, students the flexibility to study in an environment more suited to them, and struggling kids smaller classrooms with more individual attention.

Critics say it's not only taking public funds away from public schools, it's intermingling it with parochial institutions.

Mark Pudlow, a spokesman for the Florida Education Association, pointed out that almost 2.7 million students attend public school in Florida. He didn't dispute the idea that state leaders have pushed to increase the use of vouchers.

A bill approved by the Legislature in 2012 increased the budget for the Step Up program to \$229 million. That was nearly \$10.3 million more than the credit would have otherwise increased under an automatic funding formula.

"The state has certainly encouraged the growth of the corporate voucher program, despite the fact that these schools are largely unregulated and the state doesn't gauge their effectiveness compared to public schools," Pudlow told The News Service of Florida.

Again, while about 26.8 percent of the schools that participate in Step Up program are secular, only 17.5 percent of the stu-

dents enrolled attend those schools. The rest go to religious institutions.

In 2006, the Florida Supreme Court had struck down the state's Opportunity Scholarship program, the nation's first statewide school choice program.

The court had ruled the program violated the Florida Constitution's "uniformity" clause, which guarantees all Florida students a "uniform, efficient, safe, secure, and high quality system of free public schools."

This coming school year, Step Up scholarship amounts will be worth up to \$4,880.

The amount of the McKay scholarship is equal to the amount the student would have received in the public school he or she was assigned or the amount of the private school's tuition and fees, whichever is less.

This means that while the scholarship typically may cover all or the majority of the tuition of lower grades in a private school, parents may have to pay more out of pocket in the higher grades.

Also, while Step Up numbers have gone up locally, those using McKay scholarships have seen a decline, perhaps because these students typically need specialized services that private schools may not be able to offer.

Last school year, there were 31 students using McKay money to attend private schools. According to a DOE report, the number the year before was 53. In 2006, it was 36.

The Highlands County School District's Director of Student Support Services Pat Landress said students with IEPs also have the option to relocate to another public school within the district and school transportation is provided if the other school is within certain zones, which makes the bus service feasible.

Fifty or sixty Highlands County students were using the district version of McKay last school year. She said they try to work with parents and students as much as they can because they don't want them to go to a private school and want the best for the students but ultimately it's the parents' choice.

"Whatever makes parents happy," she added.