As Florida increases tax credits for scholarships, corporations donate more and families pull more students from public schools. Some worry their performance isn’t tracked.

Another school option

Sophia Dottin, right, of Gulfport is using tax-credit scholarships to send her daughter, Akilah Dottin, 7, stepson, Blake McCullough, 11, left, and son, Julian Dottin, 11, to Southside Christian Academy. Dottin praises its small class sizes.

BY KATHLEEN MCGORY | Times/Herald Tallahassee Bureau

Sophia Dottin worried her son Julian wasn’t receiving enough attention in his public elementary school in St. Petersburg.  ● “There were too many kids in the classroom and the teacher had no help,” Dottin recalled. “It was a huge red flag.”
● The single mother said she felt helpless — until she learned about Florida’s scholarship program for children from low-income families. The scholarships are funded by corporate donors, which receive a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for their contribution.  ● Dottin applied and was accepted. She enrolled Julian, 11, stepson Blake McCullough, 11, and daughter Akilah, 7, at Southside Christian Academy.  ● She wasn’t alone.

$4,880
How much tax-credit scholarships are worth.

60,000
Number of scholarships to be awarded for 2013-14, nearly 9,000 more than last year.

5,000
Cap put on number of children on waiting list, which administrators say could have reached 30,000.

$44,000
Maximum annual income a family of four can earn to qualify for scholarship.

2012-13 ENROLLMENT

51,075
The number of students attending private schools on tax-credit scholarships last year, a 27 percent increase, according to the state Department of Education.

BY GENDER

Female 51% 49%
Male

BY RACE/ETHNICITY

Hispanic 35%
Black 33%
White 25%
Other 7%
Tax-credit scholarships help many attend private schools

The number of students attending private schools on tax-credit scholarships jumped 27 percent last year, reaching a record high of 35,072 kids, according to the state Department of Education. The dramatic spike was the result of 2012 legislation increasing the amount of tax credits available. The bill prompted corporations to donate more money.

There was also a surge in parent demand, said Doug Tutthill of Step Up for Students, the nonprofit that administers the scholarships.

"So many parents are interested that we're struggling to keep up," Tutthill said.

Observers say the record growth is likely to foreshadow new legislation aimed at further expanding the program.

"I would be willing to entertain a gradual increase," said Senate Education Committee Chairman John Legg, R-Thai

But a proposed expansion would also stir controversy. Since its debut in 2002, the scholarship program has met resistance from some Democrats and union leaders, who consider it part of a movement to privatize public education.

"The reality is, when corporations are allowed to redirect their taxes away from state coffers, that money being taken away from public institutions and public education," said Sen. Dwight Bullard, D-Miami. "In this case, the money is going to private schools that are under-regulated and not subject to the same requirements as public schools."

The tax-credit scholarship program is part of a broader spectrum of school choice in Florida. The past two decades have seen the proliferation of magnet, virtual and privately managed charter schools, as well as programs that help children from low-income families and children with disabilities attend private schools.

"Parents are increasingly expecting to be able to choose their child's school," said Tutthill, a former teachers' union president. "Our role in all of this is to try to make sure low-income families have an equal chance to participate" by helping them access private schools.

Tax-credit scholarships are worth $4,880 each and can be used at private schools that participate in the program. A family of four must earn less than $44,000 in annual income to qualify.

The state limits the amount of scholarships available to families each year by limiting the amount of tax credits available to potential corporate donors.

The cap on tax credits, however, has been on the rise. In 2012, it was supposed to increase from $75 million to $259 million. But lawmakers voted to raise the cap even further to $229 million, which ended up helping 10,507 additional students.

The limit for next year is $246 million, enough to fund about 60,000 scholarships, nearly 6,000 more than this year.

The awards for 2013-14 have already been doled out, and about 5,000 children are on a waiting list. Tutthill said the waiting list could have reached 30,000, but he stopped adding names.

"I didn't want to give the families a false sense of hope," he said.

The cap on tax credits is scheduled to rise through 2015. But given the demand, Tutthill said he may lean on lawmakers to increase the limits even more.

"Our mission is to provide equal opportunities to high-poverty families," Tutthill said. "If I'm turning away 30,000 kids, if I'm not even letting them apply, then I'm in violation of my mission."

The Foundation for Florida's Future, an education nonprofit founded by former Gov. Jeb Bush, considers the program worthy.

"Increases in the cap have allowed the program to grow with the demand," spokeswoman Jaycin Etzhof wrote in a statement. "We want the program to keep pace, help close the achievement gap and be a success for those on the growing waiting list."

Rep. Erik Fresen, R-Miami, who chairs the House Education Appropriations Subcommittee, said he would need to see student performance data before voting in favor of expansion.

"You want to make sure that choice comes with very strong accountability and very strong results," Fresen said, noting that students in private schools don't have to take the state's standardized tests.

A report provided by Step Up for Students found that children in the program made the same gains in reading and math as public-school students who would be eligible.

For the Dottin family, participating in the scholarship program has been transformative.

"The small class sizes (at Southside Christian) have made such a difference," Dottin said, adding that her daughter can already read and write in cursive.

"I wouldn't want to have my children anywhere else."

Vouchers in Florida

The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program enables corporate donors to help fund scholarships for children from low-income families. Corporations receive a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for their contribution.

In 2012-13, the maximum amount of tax credits the state could award was $259 million. For 2013-14, the maximum is $286 million. The scholarship award for the upcoming school year is $4,880 toward private-school tuition. The application process has closed. For more information, visit StepUpForStudents.org.