Advocate supports school choice
Crystal River woman takes cause to capitol

By Pat Faherty

CRYSTAL RIVER — Andrea K. McCray is focused on promoting more education opportunities for children.

Today she takes her passion to Tallahassee and is scheduled to talk with legislators about Florida’s tax credit scholarships.

For McCray, it’s a well-timed priority. The agenda agreed on by both the House and Senate leadership includes expanding education choices for families in poverty by raising the cap on the scholarship program.

House Speaker Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, is a staunch supporter of expanding the availability of vouchers to middle-class families to increase opportunities for school choice.

“Advocacy is in my blood,” said McCray. “It’s what I’ve always done.” As a single mother, she admits the cause is personal, but she is pursuing it in the larger context of what it can mean for more families in Citrus County and throughout the state.

McCray explained the bill she and an organized network of parents are backing.

“This would increase it and open it up to more families,” she said. This year they awarded 59,674 K-12 scholarships statewide. They had to cut it off two months short of the application deadline and they still had 34,000 applications in the system.

“So there’s a great demand for this, and this is just the lower income portion.

“Basically, what we’re getting to is down to school choice,” she said. “If you want to choose where your child goes to school and you don’t have an extra ten grand lying around, you’re stuck with public school as an option.

“When we talk about poverty and socio-economic, it’s never been about race,” she said, “but education is your only pathway out of poverty.”

She cites her background, family history and experience and now political awareness as shaping her passion for children and education.

“I fight now for my own children to have a choice,” she said. “Public school is not preparing our children well for the future. I’m not knocking public school, but I want my child to have a choice.

“All parents should have that choice. I’m fighting for all the children.

“Public schools can’t do what they used to do 20 to 30 years ago,” she said, “The legislation on what they do has changed.”

She said there are 317 students in Citrus County participating in the program through six participating schools.

“There could be a lot more.”

McCray and Renee P. Lewis-Simmons, another parent, are scheduled to speak to the Finance and Tax Subcommittee this afternoon on behalf of the Parent Empowerment Network, an email community that advocates for common issues.