Private school scholarship expansion poised to begin

Bill awaits Scott’s pen; second administrative group coming on board

BY ERIN KOURKOUNIS
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TAMPA — Under a measure passed by state lawmakers last week, more children will be eligible for corporate tax-credit scholarships to attend private schools if Gov. Rick Scott signs it into law.

And even though the program faces new restrictions under the legislation, the expansion is a victory for Step Up for Students, the Tampa-based organization administering nearly 60,000 scholarships to low-income students this school year.

The scholarships are issued through Florida’s Tax Credit Scholarship Program, which provides tax breaks to companies donating money to nonprofit entities that pay for children to go to private schools.

“We think it’s a benefit to the program and the families served,” said Jon East, Step Up’s vice president for policy and public affairs.

The legislation comes as another organization is emerging as the state’s second scholarship authorizer after years with just Step Up. The AAA Scholarship Foundation has been qualified to start issuing corporate tax-credit scholarships in Florida next school year.

The organization already administers scholarships in five states, Alabama, Arizona, Georgia, Louisiana and Pennsylvania. It qualified in March and has brought in $600,000 in corporate pledges so far toward Florida scholarships.

“We’re almost always the underdog in every state, but we think we do what we do best, helping the lowest income families.”

Kim Dyson, AAA Scholarship Foundation president and chief executive officer

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lowest income families. We’re not trying to compete with anyone.”

Under the bill approved by the Legislature, beginning in the 2016-17 school year, a family of four earning up to $62,010 a year would be eligible for at least a partial scholarship — a nearly $20,000 increase over the current $43,568 annual income limit.

The value of each full individual scholarship would also rise, from $4,800 up to $5,272.

Senate Bill 850, which includes other education provisions, calls for the state auditor general to track how money is being spent by organizations that authorize the scholarships, a provision that would take effect immediately.

Additionally, the organizations are prohibited from using state money for lobbying and political efforts, something Step Up for Students has done in the past. According to 2012 tax forms filed with the Internal Revenue Service, the nonprofit group has spent $645,534 on lobbying in the past four years.

“We would want to advocate for the program, so we would find a way to pay for that privately,” East said.

He noted that this year, the organization’s two lobbyists were paid by the Florida Federation for Children, which advocates for school choice initiatives and is a branch of the American Federation for Children. Step Up’s founder, John Kirtley, is the chairman of the Florida Federation for Children.

In a move to answer lawmakers who want more accountability from participating private schools, the bill calls for scholarship students’ scores on state-approved tests to be submitted to Florida State University’s Learning Systems Institute. The institute will publish reports on progress in math and reading.

East said as public schools transition next year to a new test aligned with new education standards, Step Up’s hope is that private schools follow suit so a better comparison can be made between them.

“We’re hoping that when some of the hysteria goes down, we’ll be able to persuade some students to do it on their own,” he said. “I think you’ll see that happen.”

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