Demonstrators protest in support of a school voucher program on Tuesday in Tallahassee. A national advocacy group bused supporters in from all over the state.

10,000 rally in support of vouchers at Capitol

BY GRAY ROHRER
Tallahassee Bureau

TALLAHASSEE — At least 10,000 students, parents and administrators marched on the Capitol steps Tuesday to support a controversial program that gives parents money to enroll their children in private or charter schools.

The main focus of the rally was a lawsuit by the teachers union that challenges the school voucher program, saying it diverts money from public schools.

The demonstration was organized by the Alliance for School Choice, a national advocacy group that paid for 240 buses to bring the participants from schools all over the state to Tallahassee.

As they marched to the Capitol, the demonstrators chanted “Drop the suit” — the same slogan emblazoned on the neon green shirts many of them wore.

“We just want the people who make the laws here in Florida to understand that we need — our students need — this scholarship because this scholarship is for those parents who can’t afford a private school,” said Yani- ra Pares, principal of Central Pointe Christian Academy in Kissimmee.

The rally highlighted a bitter divide in Florida education. The Florida Education Association, the state’s largest teachers union and challenger of the voucher program, held its own rally of about 2,000 teach-

Please turn to RALLY, A7
ers last week at the Capitol, decrying low pay and an overreliance on standardized testing.

FEA officials say they will continue to pursue the suit, which is pending in the courts.

“What are they so afraid of going to the courts to ensure this voucher scheme is legal? Let’s let the courts decide this once and for all,” said FEA president Joanne McCall.

Called the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program, it was designed to give poor families an alternative to failing public schools. Lawmakers have steadily increased the income eligibility standards and total funding for the program in recent years.

Currently, households making less than $55,777 per year — 230 percent of the federal poverty level — are eligible for the program, but that threshold rises to $63,000 starting July 1.

Those standards already are scheduled to increase next year without legislative action. Even so, some parents at the rally were anxious about the lawsuit, saying the program is vital to sending their children to a decent school.

Sharon Ferrer, mother of a Central Pointe Christian Academy student, said she opted to send her son there instead of a regular public school because of better security, smaller classroom sizes and a more rigorous curriculum. But without the voucher, she couldn’t afford it.

“It would be impossible for me to send him to any private school,” Ferrer said.

A similar voucher program was struck down by the courts in 2006. The FEA has fought several school choice bills passed by the Republican-controlled Legislature in recent years but has taken particular issue with the scholarship program.

Martin Luther King III joined the rally but said the rift between teachers unions and school choice advocates is a false choice. He said his father would have advocated for both alternative school options and the public school system.

“What choice does is essentially create options, particularly for poor and working families that they would not necessarily normally have,” King said.

He said his father would have looked “at the public system and said the public system must be supported. To me, it’s not an either-or; it’s a both-and,” King said.