

Parents Choose in Florida

The state tries to meet rising demand for its school-choice programs.



Students sits in the classroom at Melrose Elementary School in St. Petersburg, Florida, March 18.

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The best defense of school-choice programs is that parents keep choosing them, and Florida is proving the point. A year after setting up a new school-voucher program, state lawmakers passed a bill last week to expand it. Eight House Democrats joined Republicans in favor last Monday, and the Senate voted Friday along party lines to send it to the Governor's desk.

Florida created the taxpayer-funded Family Empowerment Scholarship (FES) last year to give vouchers to up to 18,000 low-income students. Current law expands the enrollment cap annually by 0.25% of the number of students in public school, so about 7,000 more students could obtain scholarships next year.

But that's a fraction of the roughly 35,000 eligible students on waiting lists this year for FES and the larger Florida Tax Credit scholarship program (FTC), according to Step Up for Students, a private nonprofit.

The new bill lifts the annual FES cap increase to 1% from 0.25% of public school enrollment, making room for about 28,000 more students next year—and 28,000 more each year after that. If capacity exceeds demand from eligible students—enough that more than 5% of available scholarships are unawarded—the legislation would trigger a 25% increase in the

household-income cap so that more parents can apply. With no limit on the capacity escalator, the vouchers could extend beyond low-income families, though there is still significant demand from low-income parents who get priority.

Roughly 70% of students receiving FES and FTC scholarships are African-American or Hispanic, according to state data. About 87% of FES students come from households at or below 185% of the federal poverty level, which is \$48,470 for a family of four.

A recent political flap over the FTC program exposed how deeply these families value their ability to choose schools. Under pressure from two Democratic lawmakers, corporations including Fifth Third Bank promised to stop donating to the FTC scholarships after an Orlando paper reported in January that some religious schools with voucher students had traditional views of homosexuality. The FTC vouchers are funded solely by corporate donations, and Fifth Third Bank's withdrawal put more than 700 scholarships at risk.

But an alliance of black and Hispanic pastors held a press conference in Tallahassee to support the program, and parents rallied around [#saveourscholarship](#) on [Twitter](#). “Pressuring one set of innocents—donors—into throwing another set of innocents under the bus—scholarship students,” wrote Democratic lawmaker James Bush in the Lakeland Ledger, “is not social justice.” The bad press died down, and Fifth Third Bank reversed its decision.

For all the negative media, two House Democrats who voted against the voucher program last year supported its expansion. “It’s the right thing for my community,” [said](#) lawmaker Anika Tene Omphroy, who represents an area inland from Fort Lauderdale. The bill also makes it easier for students to remain eligible for the FTC program once they’re in, and allows students who couldn’t renew FTC scholarships because of lack of funds to transfer to FES.

All of which shows that teachers union opposition can be overcome when reformers join with parents to form a populist coalition. School choice is a winning political issue.