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Democratic lawmakers warm up to vouchers

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In 2001, Democrats in the Legislature pounded Republican plans to start a private school voucher program for poor and predominantly minority kids. They said it was unconstitutional, a drain on public schools, even un-American. In the end, all but one Democrat voted against it.

Times have changed. This year, a bill to vastly expand the same program passed by large margins.

And this time, a third of the Democratic caucus was on board.

"I'm a strong advocate for public school education, and I'm not necessarily a strong advocate for vouchers," said Rep. Bill Heller, D-St. Petersburg, one of four Tampa Bay-area Democrats to vote yes. But "the bottom line has to be the child. If good things are happening for the child, then you can justify it."

In the past few years, a slow trickle of black Democrats have embraced tax-credit vouchers, which are funded by corporations in exchange for tax credits. But this year a steady stream of Democrats, including a handful of white Democrats like Heller, crossed over, moving toward a program championed by former Gov. Jeb Bush, even as Republicans were backing away from Bush's hard-core emphasis on the FCAT.

The erosion in Democratic opposition is especially noteworthy given the timing.

The same Legislature whacked public school funding by \$332-million. And this fall's ballot will include two proposed constitutional amendments aimed at making vouchers a permanent part of Florida's education landscape.

One political observer said the Democrats may have handed voucher

supporters ammunition for persuading Floridians to vote yes.

The electorate is "moving away from strictly partisan approaches to resolving issues," said Darryl Paulson, a professor of government at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg. "It seems to me the strongest argument they could make is there is growing bipartisan support for vouchers."

The legislation, spearheaded by Rep. Trey Traviesa, R-Tampa, increases the annual cap on corporate contributions from \$88-million to \$118-million. Initially, Traviesa pushed for bigger change - an additional \$30-million each year for the next five years - but scaled back to accommodate budget concerns and warring lawmakers.

"The bigger it felt, the harder it was to get some of the members who were on the line to come over," Traviesa said. "I wanted a strong bipartisan product."

About 20,000 students are in the program - including 1,676 in the Tampa Bay area - and 64 percent are black or Hispanic. Another 5,000 students will be able to join if, as expected, Gov. Charlie Crist signs the legislation.

The legislation increases the amount of each scholarship to \$3,950, up \$200 from this year. The average cost per student in public school is about \$7,000.

Some Democratic supporters say they back the program because unlike Opportunity Scholarships, the state's first voucher program - which the Florida Supreme Court struck down in 2006 - the money for tax-credit scholarships doesn't come directly out of state coffers. Some offered what critics call a semantic defense.

"I don't think I'm voting for a voucher," said Rep. Betty Reed, a

Tampa Democrat who has 13 private schools in her district that accept tax-credit scholarships. "It's a scholarship."

Reed initially voted for the bill, saying she wanted to give low-income families more school choice. But she switched her vote a few days later, citing budget concerns.

Heller voted against the bill in committee. But then he visited the Yvonne C. Reed Christian School in St. Petersburg and talked to parents who use tax-credit vouchers. He said they changed his mind.

The other Tampa Bay area Democrats who voted for the bill are Rep. Janet Long, D-Seminole, Rep. Darryl Rouson, D-St. Petersburg, and Rep. Michael Scionti, D-Tampa.

"I think they're seeing the light," said Rep. Seth McKeel, R-Lakeland. "This is not a voucher program. This is helping people."

Most Democrats remain wary. Many continue to argue that vouchers hurt public schools - and that this year was the worst possible time for an expansion. Others fear poor and minority kids are being used as a Trojan horse for a more radical agenda: vouchers for all kids.

House Minority Leader Dan Gelber said some Democrats are "genuinely conflicted."

Parents of scholarship recipients lobbied them intensely. And it's not unusual to hear those parents say they don't like the FCAT or prefer the smaller classes they see in private schools.

"To a certain extent, I don't know if you're seeing people like the program," Gelber said, "or you're seeing Democrats throw their hands up with what Republicans have put in our public schools, which to some extent has made these private schools more attractive