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Vouchers cut school costs

The private school option saved Florida \$38-million last school year, a report says.

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Want to save the state money at a time when school budgets are being slashed? Offer more vouchers to poor kids.

So suggests a new report from the Florida Legislature's well-respected research arm.

The Office of Program Policy Analysis & Government Accountability, or OPPAGA, says the state saved \$38.9-million last school year through its corporate tax credit voucher program, which allowed 21,493 low-income students to attend private school at taxpayer expense.

The reason: simple math.

The value of a voucher — \$3,950 this year, up \$200 from last year — is far lower than the roughly \$7,000 it takes to educate a student in public school.

"While the report reduces the amount of corporate tax revenues received by the state, it produces a net fiscal benefit," says the report, released Tuesday. "This occurs because state education spending for students who receive scholarships is reduced by more than the amount of revenue lost."

The report undermines what is arguably the most persistent and compelling argument against vouchers — that they drain money from public schools. Two previous reports, from Florida TaxWatch in 2003 and the Collins Center for Public Policy in 2007, reached similar conclusions, but opponents have continued to make the claim that vouchers hurt public schools financially.

The report drew immediate fire from Senate Minority Leader Al Lawson, D-Tallahassee, and the Florida Education Association, the state teachers union. Lawson, who supports vouchers, said in a letter to Senate President Jeff Atwater, R-North Palm Beach, that he objected to calling the fiscal impact of the program a "savings to the state."

"By not spending any education funds

as a result of the scholarship program, public education is and will continue to be adversely impacted and result in an outcome which we cannot afford in these difficult economic times," he wrote.

OPPAGA based its calculations on an annual per-pupil spending figure of \$6,106 — which is actually lower than the current \$6,852 figure touted by the Florida Department of Education.

The research center also assumed 90 percent of the students who received tax credit vouchers would have attended public schools had they not received them. The average household income for students in the program is \$24,543, the report says.

Tax credit vouchers are funded by corporations that get dollar-for-dollar tax credits for donations to state-approved scholarship organizations.

The report was mandated by the Legislature last spring when it expanded the annual cap for the tax-credit program from \$88-million to \$118-million. Though the bill passed with surprisingly strong support from Democrats, voucher critics characterized it as a slap in the face to public schools.

"Imagine what they'd do ... if it wasn't bad economic times," Mark Pudlow, spokesman for the state teachers union, told the Gradebook, the St. Petersburg Times education blog, at the time.

"You're in a situation where you're cutting hundreds of millions of dollars from the education budget ... yet we're going to expand corporate vouchers."

On Tuesday, Pudlow said the OPPAGA report was flawed.

"It seems like there's a lot of scenarios and a lot of assumptions and not a lot of facts," he said.

Voucher supporters proposed a much bigger expansion of the tax-credit program last year, before scaling back. According to the OPPAGA report, 6,000 eligible students did not get vouchers last year because of the cap on the program.

John Kirtley, the Tampa businessman who chairs the Florida School Choice Fund, said voucher supporters are crafting their agenda for the legislative session that begins in March. But if they push for another expansion, it seems likely they'll use the new report to boost their case.

"As the legislature looks for ways to be more efficient, I would imagine a program saving \$40-million a year would get some attention," Kirtley wrote in an e-mail.

Whether that position gains traction remains to be seen. There are many other arguments against vouchers, including blurring of church-state lines and either mixed or limited research about their effectiveness. The comments from Democrats Tuesday suggest the cost argument isn't going away, either.

Lawson said in an interview that he wants OPPAGA to take a more in-depth look at the cost issue. He also said he didn't think he could support a voucher expansion next year.

"Public education is hit too hard," he said.

"What we hear Sen. Lawson saying is that he wants low-income parents to have choices and he also wants public schools to have more money," Jon East, spokesman for the Florida School Choice Fund, said in response. "We respect both those desires, which are not at all in conflict."

The OPPAGA report looked at two other questions. It said the tax-credit program could broaden its financial base by expanding to include insurance premium tax credits. It also said incentives are not likely to persuade private schools to make their students take the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test.

The state does not require that voucher recipients take the FCAT — a must for most public school students — but they are mandated to take a comparable standardized test.

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