

# Vouchers raise concerns

**By Kristy Vickery**

Guest Writer

As public school officials contemplate how to deal with an increasing deficit, a new report on the cost of private school vouchers could put more pressure on them.

"The only way to get funding for a school is if a child is sitting in a desk," Orange County School Board Chairwoman Joie Cadle said. "Having more (private school) vouchers would take money away from public schools."

A report released last week by the state Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability, or OPPAGA, shows that students choosing private schools may cost individual school systems money, but the state will actually spend less per pupil on students who use vouchers.

The OPPAGA report says the Corporate Tax Credit, a voucher program established in 2001 to help low-income students afford private school tuition, saved state taxpayers \$38.9 million last school year and currently serves 23,234 students from households whose income meets federal guidelines for free and reduced lunch.

"We welcome OPPAGA's findings," said John Kirtley, chairman of the Florida School Choice Fund and the Tampa businessman who helped create the program. "We certainly want taxpayers to know we are saving them money, and we hope our partners in public education benefit from our savings."

Students in private schools cost the state less than students in public

schools. According to the report, in 2007-08, the cost of the average scholarship for a student in private schools was \$3,412, compared with the state cost of \$6,106 in public schools. It is also estimated that 90 percent of scholarship recipients would have attended a public school if they had not received a scholarship through the program. For each \$1 lost through corporate tax credits, the state saves \$1.49 in general revenue.

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

Although these savings please Kirtley, he said it is not the purpose of the program.

"The purpose of the program is not to save taxpayers money, but to give low-income families more educational options if their kids are struggling in their assigned schools," he said. "Our only goal is to improve the educational outcomes of low-income kids."

But some public school officials warn against low-income families making the choice to educate their children in a private setting.

Orange County School Board member Rick Roach said parents who use voucher programs should be careful.

"There's no proof that they improve the quality of education," Roach said.

Seminole County Public School Board member Jeanne Morris also has concerns about private school voucher programs.

"Students lose all constitutional rights in private school settings," Morris said.

Morris also said she questions the quality of education students receive under these programs because they are not required to take the same tests as students in public schools.

"There's no measurement to see the success of education these kids are receiving," Morris said. "And when you set your own grades, you can give kids whatever grades they want."

The OPPAGA report states that private school representatives will not encourage their schools to participate in state tests, such as the FCAT, and some would likely stop accepting scholarship students if required to use the FCAT. The report does undermine the argument that vouchers drain public school funds.

Kirtley said he hopes that these savings will be dedicated to improving outcomes for low-income children in public schools and has high hopes for the future of voucher programs.

"In terms of the future, we hope that legislators will continue to provide options for low-income parents, whether they be magnets, charters, virtual schools and scholarships to private schools," Kirtley said. "Every child is different and some need a unique learning environment to thrive."