

CityWalk's star rises

DESPITE ECONOMY, UNIVERSAL ORLANDO'S NIGHTCLUB DISTRICT IS GOING STRONG, CFB

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Jon Gruden should be fired. Whitley, C1



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More students get state to pay private tuition

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By the numbers

41,843
Florida children use state vouchers

10,862
Central Florida kids use state vouchers.

134%
Rise in participation in Osceola County, where growth was the fastest in Central Florida.

\$21,769
The biggest scholarship awarded to a special-needs student last school year.

\$38.9 M
How much a state auditing group says one voucher program saved taxpayers last year.

More than two years ago, the state stopped giving tuition vouchers to students who wanted to leave failing public schools for private school. Since then, Florida's other two programs that pay private-school tuition for disabled kids or poor children have grown by 21 percent and 65 percent respectively. Today, 42,000 Florida students attend private school on the public's dime. And a new study touting voucher benefits could trigger more expansion.

Why is the number growing?

As more people learn about the programs, more sign up. Low-income families are thrilled they can afford to find a school that meets their children's needs.

PLEASE SEE: VOUCHER, A6

Why are these 2 programs still allowed?

A 1999 lawsuit that challenged vouchers targeted only Opportunity Scholarships, offered to students at public schools that had received two F grades in a four-year period. The Florida Supreme Court ruled it was unconstitutional to do that.

But no one has fought the two other programs in court. The state's teachers union, one group that sued to kill Opportunity Scholarships, isn't planning to go after those two because of the cost and time involved. Critics argue the court ruling should apply to all three programs because they are so similar. But the Supreme Court justices noted it would be improper to make that assumption.

How much do vouchers cost Florida?

Last school year, the state gave out a total of \$205 million through both programs. This year, legislators expanded the program for poor students by \$30 million, which means \$118 million can be distributed and 5,000 to 6,000 more

poor children can participate.

How does it save money?

The biggest voucher a low-income child can get is \$3,950 annually. That's about \$3,000 less than what public schools receive per student on average.

How are voucher recipients' grades?

They should have a better idea this spring. Low-income kids with vouchers must take standardized tests to gauge their academic progress. The state is supposed to study the data and release a report in March.

Do public schools suffer?

Though voucher advocates argue the programs help alleviate public-school crowding, school districts argue they are hurt financially. Each year, districts hire teachers and staff and buy supplies based on how many students they expect.

When a student doesn't show up, the public school loses the money it needs to cover those costs, said a district official in Orange County. Schools there already had to let some teachers go because of drops in enrollment and state funding.

Can kids still sign up?

Yes. There's no limit to the number of disabled children who can get vouchers to attend private school.

The money earmarked for the program serving poor kids will cover almost 29,000 students. As of last week, 27,612 applications had been approved. Voucher advocates hope lawmakers expand the program again. A recent report by a state auditing group says the vouchers given to poor students saved taxpayers \$38.9 million last year -- that is sure to get legislators' attention.

What about next year?

In addition to opening the program to more students, voucher supporters are pushing the state to increase the amount students receive in vouchers. Vouchers often don't cover the full cost of private school; some families end up having to drop out.

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Florida's 3 programs

McKay Scholarships: Available to disabled students since 1999. Last school year, scholarships ranged from \$5,160 to \$21,769; vast majority of the \$131.3 million given out went to private schools. Program also allows transfers to other public schools.

Corporate Tax Credit Scholarships: Created in 2001 to pay for private-school tuition for low-income students. Income limit: \$39,220 a year for a family of four. Businesses donate money and get state-income-tax break. Vouchers also help cover transportation costs to attend public school in another county. Vast majority of \$73.5 million distributed last school year went to private schools.

Opportunity Scholarships: Most of program, introduced in 1999, was thrown out by 2006 court order. Paid for kids attending public schools that received two F grades in a four-year period to transfer to private schools. Program also helps children transfer to higher-performing public schools, which is still allowed.