

St. Petersburg Times

Published Wednesday, January 21, 2009

Bill could make school vouchers more available

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Florida's largest voucher program would see its potential funding base and applicant pool expand under a bill filed Tuesday by a Wesley Chapel Republican.

HB 453, filed by Rep. Will Weatherford, would shore up the state's corporate tax credit scholarship program by including insurance premium tax credits and some sales tax credits. It would also require — if a scholarship funding organization requests it — that the state Department of Education notify families whose children are eligible for the vouchers, which are worth \$3,950 each.

The program served 21,493 low-income students last year. But many families learn about it only through word of mouth.

"In today's economic climate, there's a lack of corporate tax liability," Weatherford said. "We want to allow companies that don't pay corporate income taxes ... to be able to participate."

The bill would not increase the state cap on corporate contributions to the program, which was raised from \$88-million to \$118-million last year and drew opposition from most Democrats. But Weatherford said it's still possible the cap could be upped during the session that begins in March. One voucher opponent said the proposed changes in his bill pave the way for exactly that.

"If memory serves, about two days ago we cut half a billion dollars from public education in this state," said Damien Filer, political director for Progress Florida.

"Why would we be spending our time looking for even more ways to take money out of public schools?"

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

It was not immediately clear how much broader the funding base would be with the additional types of tax credits.

Opponents have long argued that vouchers drain money from public schools, but a report last month from the Legislature's research arm concluded tax-credit scholarships save taxpayer money. The report, hotly disputed by critics, also said 6,000 eligible students did not get vouchers last year because of the contributions cap.