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Editorial pages, A17-A19

Published Sunday, March 22, 2009

School vouchers on rise in Lake

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TAVARES — More low-income families in Lake County are turning to the state for help paying private-school tuition.

Today, 266 local children — a number that has nearly doubled in three years — use state-funded tuition vouchers. And that number likely will grow as more parents learn about the program that some studies show actually saves the state millions of dollars each year.

Children can get as much as \$3,950 a year to use at any private school. That's about \$3,000 less than what the state pays public schools to educate each student.

The program also allows children to attend a public school in another school district and will give a \$500 scholarship to offset transportation costs.

Almost all families participating take the private-school option.

Statewide, about 23,000 kids use these vouchers, sometimes referred to as Florida Corporate Tax Credit scholarships. Companies can donate money to the program and get credit on state income taxes.

Opponents argue the program takes money away from public schools, which already struggle with funding cuts and sagging enrollment, thanks to the economy.

Opponents also don't like the idea of public money going to religious institutions, which are the recipients of most of these vouchers. But the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 2002 that a similar program in Cleveland is constitutional, even if the vouchers paid for education at parochial schools.

25,000-plus children

Many participating families love the

program. John Kimer, a father of three in Fruitland Park, said he could never send his oldest son to a private school if it weren't for the scholarship.

Taylor Kimer, a second-grader, has blossomed during his few years at First Academy in Leesburg, his father said.

"His reading level compared to his friends that go to public school — the difference is night and day," said Kimer, the youth pastor at a church in Wildwood. "He's really developed and done so extremely well and learned so much."

The agencies that distribute the vouchers are already taking applications for next school year, when they expect participation to exceed 25,000 children. The program is designed to serve at least 29,000.

Last spring, legislators expanded the voucher program, allowing corporations to donate as much as \$118 million toward vouchers in return for tax credits. Before that, the amount had been capped at \$88 million.

This spring, lawmakers will discuss a host of other changes to the program, including allowing insurance companies to contribute and get credits against their insurance-premium tax.

A Senate bill introduced this month would require the agencies that collect donations for vouchers to give at least 25 percent of the money to students attending public schools. It could pay for such things as remedial programs and computers.

Probably 'a wash'

Lake County schools face steep funding cuts in 2009-10. But, so far, it doesn't appear that the district has been affected much by the loss of children transferring to private

schools with vouchers, officials said.

But that might be because as voucher kids leave the public schools, families who can no longer pay for private school because of economic setbacks are enrolling in public schools.

"My intuition tells me it's probably going to be a wash," said Harry Fix, the school district's director of growth planning.

For more information on the Corporate Tax Credit vouchers or to download applications, visit the Web site of Tampa-based Step Up For Students, which helps coordinate the program. The Web site is stepupforstudents.org.

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Vouchers Grow in Popularity

The number of Lake County poor kids receiving tuition vouchers from the state to attend private school has risen sharply in three years.

District	Feb. 2006	Feb. 2009	% Change
Brevard	420	751	79
Lake	144	266	85
Orange	2,603	3,138	21
Osceola	512	962	88
Polk	319	547	71
Seminole	352	523	49
Volusia	452	865	91
State	14,084	23,259	65