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House measure fortifies school vouchers

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A private school voucher program for children from low-income families would be strengthened by a bill the House passed Thursday, but critics say it would be another financial blow for public education.

Businesses now can take a dollar-for-dollar credit against their corporate income tax obligation for donations to the program.

The bill would let insurance companies get the same kind of credit against premium taxes they collect from their customers. That is expected to result in more money for the voucher program that spent \$73.5 million in the last school year. It would remain capped, though, at \$118 million a year.

The House voted 94-23 for the bill (HB 453) with unanimous support from Republicans while Democrats were about evenly divided.

It next goes to the Senate, where a similar measure (SB 1310) is awaiting floor action.

Supporters argued that corporate tax credit vouchers save money for the state even though it is giving up millions in tax payments. That is because the vouchers pay less to private schools than taxpayers spend on each student in public schools.

The vouchers give low-income parents a chance to send their children to schools of their choice.

"We know based on scientific data that every student learns differently, that education is not a one-size-fits-all," said the sponsor, Rep. Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel.

Opponents said the program leaves public schools short because they are funded according to enrollment. Rep. Geraldine Thompson, D-Orlando, said public schools still

have to pay the same amounts for utilities, maintenance and other fixed overhead expenses even if they have a few less students.

Rep. Kelly Skidmore, D-Boca Raton, also noted that many of the private schools in the voucher program are parochial.

"I don't feel that my taxes now need to pay for someone else's religious education," Skidmore said.

Both sides have been using the same debating points since Florida adopted its first voucher program advocated by then-Gov. Jeb Bush in 1999. The key difference has been a significant weakening of once virtually unanimous opposition by Democrats.

The Florida Supreme Court struck down the Bush program for students from failing public schools. The tax credit program and another one for disabled students have not been challenged.

