

Proposal would expand voucher program

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THE CAPITAL, TALLAHASSEE, Feb. 12, 2010 — Proponents of school choice programs will get their chance to argue their case before the Legislature under a proposal put forth this week that would massively expand the state's voucher program.

Rep. Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, filed a bill this week that would create additional scholarships and also up the amount per award under the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, a program that gives businesses a tax credit in exchange for a paying for a scholarship. About 25,000 students currently receive scholarships of \$3,950 to attend a Florida private school through the program.

"I think that someone who doesn't have the financial means to go to private school should have the choice," Weatherford said.

Vouchers have long been a contentious issue in Florida, with the teacher's union standing in firm opposition to the program. In 2006, the Florida Supreme Court struck down a Jeb Bush-supported voucher program that had provided tax dollars for private schools since 1999.

The corporate income tax scholarship program does not directly take state dollars for private schools, but some public school advocates argue that the public schools still lose money because the tax break that businesses receive for

donating to the program reduces the amount of money coming into the state's general fund — some of which would be available for schools.

Proponents of the program counter that if these same students were in the public school system, the state would have to spend more money because the state's per pupil funding is higher than the amount given to each child under the voucher system.

State Rep. Marty Kiar, D-Davie, who opposes the bill, said given the tough economic climate, the state needs to focus on the public schools, which serve the majority of Florida students. In a more flourishing economy, the state could put resources toward a voucher program, he said.

"The one thing that is undisputed, the voucher programs do help a number of kids, they do" Kiar said. "The problem is it's only a few kids. And the vast majority of kids in our state have to attend our public school system."

The tax credit scholarship program is currently capped at \$118 million, but under Weatherford's proposal, if enough donations were provided that the fund got to 90 percent of that, or \$106.2 million, the program could expand by 25 percent. That would put the new cap at \$147.5 million.

It could then continually expand by 25 percent if the donations continued to meet the 90 percent threshold.

Weatherford said that in addition to increasing the cap, the plan is to also slowly boost the amount of money given per award to students so that it would ultimately equal 80 percent of the per pupil funding for public schools. In the current year's budget, the state allocated \$6,873 per student, which means under the 80 percent goal, a student would receive \$5,498.40 toward private school tuition. But that number would change from year-to-year depending on how much the Legislature puts toward per pupil funding.

The current award of \$3,950 is often too low, Weatherford said, because it falls short of what many private schools charge. So, students still are required to pay thousands of dollars on their own.

The proposal (HB 1009) has not yet been assigned to a committee, but it has two big backers — the governor and education commissioner.

Gov. Charlie Crist, in rolling out his education budget last month, noted that the expansion of the program was one of his legislative priorities for the 2010 legislative sessions. Commissioner Eric Smith also released a statement this week in support of the legislation.

"These changes will prove vital in helping low-income students secure learning opportunities that fit their needs, and I encourage all education stakeholders to join me in supporting this measure," Smith said in a release.