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Florida voucher bill gets a little less sweeping

The value of a tax-credit voucher in Florida would increase more slowly than proposed just a few weeks ago under a [committee substitute bill](#) filed in the Florida Senate last week.

Under the original legislation, the value of a voucher -- now at \$3,950 -- would rise over four years to 80 percent of per-pupil funding for a public school student (now at \$6,866). Under the substitute, the value would rise to 60 percent of per-pupil funding next year, but then increase only 4 percent per year, and only in those years in which the cap on contributions rose as well. It would still be topped at 80 percent, but would take at least six years to get there.

Budget concerns are behind the change.

Jon East, spokesman for [Step Up For Students](#), told the Gradebook that lead sponsors Sen. Joe Negron, R-Stuart, and Rep. Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, made the change in response to concerns from the Revenue Estimating Conference that the scholarship amount could increase in a year in which the cap did not -- and, as a result, possibly "break less favorably for the state budget."

A conference [report](#) posted last week says the revised bill would save taxpayers \$13.5 million over the next five years (on top of savings [that taxpayers already get from tax-credit vouchers](#)). Under the conference's assumptions, the additional savings decrease each year until 2014-15, when the changes would result in a \$6.3 million loss to the base line. East said the additional savings would return once the voucher value reached 80 percent: "At that point, all the enrollment growth would be pure savings."

The conference projects more than 66,000 students will be using tax-credit vouchers by 2014-15, up from 23,233 funded this year.

Tuesday morning, the bill goes to the Senate Finance and Tax Committee, which includes two Tampa Bay lawmakers: Vice Chairman Charlie Justice, D-St. Petersburg, and Ronda Storms, R-Valrico. In a legislative alert that went out Sunday, the [Florida PTA](#) says kill it.

The House version ([HB 1009](#)) has been assigned to three committees.

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