

Massive Voucher Expansion Headed to Governor

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TALLAHASSEE — A bipartisan group of lawmakers approved a massive expansion of a corporate-funded school voucher program, providing a mechanism for the program to continually expand and put more money toward private school tuition.

The Florida House, by a 95-23 vote, approved SB 2126, which would expand the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, a program that gives a \$3,950 scholarship to more than 25,000 Florida students to attend private school. The program, established in 2001, exists on donations from corporations, which in return get a tax credit.

The change to the program would expand the cap from \$118 million to \$140 million and increase by 25 percent when the donations reach 90 percent of the cap. The student scholarships would also gradually increase from \$3,950 to 80 percent of the per pupil funding for public school. Currently, public schools receive \$6,866 per student.

The measure also provides additional tax credits for the program, adding oil and gas severance taxes, beverage taxes on alcohol and other types of business taxes to those against which businesses can get credits for contributing to a scholarship.

“This is a milestone in the empowerment of low-income families in Florida and for the parental choice movement nationwide,” John Kirtley, chairman of the pro-school choice group Step Up For Students, said in a release after the vote. “This bill will make the scholarship more accountable and more available, and I’m heartened that we saw such bipartisan support. I think people are recognizing that this program strengthens public education.”

Vouchers have a long and contentious history in Florida. Former Gov. Jeb Bush is a major proponent of them, but his initial state voucher program was struck down by the courts. The state Supreme Court said they violated Florida’s requirement of having a uniform school system, after lower courts had thrown vouchers out by saying they put state money into religious institutions.

However, the tax credit scholarship founded in 2001 has continued to grow over the past few years.

A year ago, Gov. Charlie Crist approved a measure that would give the scholarship a new revenue source, by offering up insurance premium credits to companies that donated.

Opponents of expanding the corporate tax credit vouchers argue that the program takes tax money away from public schools, while supporters

say that it actually saves the state money because the amount the public schools spend per pupil is higher than the voucher tax credit.

A legislative analysis of the measure predicted there would be a \$31 million hit on the state budget for fiscal year 2010-2011, with a recurring impact on general revenue of \$228.8 million.

Rep. Rick Kriseman, D-St. Petersburg, said the hit on general revenue would ultimately impact public schools, which are struggling as is.

“If our desire is for parents to have a choice, why do we continue to diminish the quality of our public schools, causing parents to demand a private one?” he said during House debate on the bill.

Kriseman’s Democratic colleague, Rep. Darryl Rouson, D-St. Petersburg, a proponent, countered that if a student does better in private school, then that student should be able to go there, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

“If they will flourish in a private school setting, they ought to be allowed to go there and not be denied because their parents can’t afford it,” Rouson said. “There are children who need both because one school does not fit every child.”

The bill now goes to Crist, who is widely expected to sign the bill.