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Governor signs private school voucher expansion

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THE Florida parents who can't afford to enroll their children in private schools have new cause to rejoice.

Gov. Charlie Crist signed a bill Thursday that expands eligibility and funding for the state's corporate-funded school voucher program for children of low-income families.

Crist said SB 2126 gives parents a greater choice in what schools their children will attend.

"That's why this is such significant legislation," he said. "Matches our students with the right schools."

The bill, sponsored in the Senate by Joe Negron, R-Palm City, raises the funding cap on the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program from \$118 million to \$140 million in the coming budget year, but the cap can rise by as much as 25 percent annually if the program stays successful. Over the years, the funding per pupil would rise to 80 percent.

The bill, the House equivalent of which was sponsored by Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, also raises the income eligibility for charter and religious school vouchers from 200 percent above the poverty level to 230 percent above the poverty level, allowing greater access for children from low-income families struggling in the re-

cession.

"The bill recognizes a primary principle I believe in, and that is that parents are the first educators," Negron said.

Businesses that fund the program are currently awarded with corporate tax credits and insurance premium tax credits, but the bill authorizes three new credits: oil and gas production, sales and alcoholic beverages.

The voucher bill has been criticized by the Florida Education Association and lawmakers for taking money from public schools. But it passed in the Senate with the support of both Republicans and Minority Leader Al Lawson of Tallahassee, and in the House with an overwhelming majority of 95-27.

At the signing Thursday, Lawson, who gave the closing argument for the bill when it was on the Senate floor, said that the voucher program has led to better grades and student leadership.

"You have to know that we're on the right track," he said.

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Watch video at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Owvu4P8opM&feature=player_embedded

