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## Vouchers for 70,000 kids

Gov. Crist signs bill that will dramatically expand number of tax-credit scholarships.

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TALLAHASSEE — With bipartisan backing, Gov. Charlie Crist ushered in the most sweeping expansion of private school vouchers in Florida history on Thursday and revived a long-festering question:

Where does it end? Senate Bill 2126, which Crist signed into law, is expected to ramp up significantly the number of students using tax-credit vouchers. There are 27,700 students in the program now. If current growth trends continue, 70,000 could be enrolled by 2015. That's more than the number

of students in the Pasco County school district.

Alarmed by the potential growth, critics fear that the day lawmakers propose vouchers for all is closer than ever.

"I truly think that's the goal," Janet Clark, Pinellas County School Board chairwoman, said. "Every incremental foothold that

voucher supporters get is a victory for them. You give them an inch and they're going to take another inch."

Supporters of Florida's two voucher programs, which are limited to disabled and high-poverty students, say that isn't likely. Doing so could invite a lawsuit like the one that sank the state's

first voucher program in 2006, they say. And it would jeopardize what has become an increasingly bipartisan effort.

"People think we have a good thing going and don't want to mess with it," said Rep. Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, the bill's lead House sponsor.

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But, Weatherford added, it's likely that voucher supporters will keep pushing for more. And, he said, if given the chance, "I would love to expand it to everybody."

SB 2126 is the latest milestone in Florida's 11-year voucher war.

It significantly increases the value of a tax-credit voucher, which is funded by corporate donations and available only to students whose family incomes qualify them for free or reduced-price lunch.

Tax-credit vouchers are now worth \$3,950 each. Under SB 2126, the value will rise over several years until it reaches 80 percent of the state's per-pupil funding.

At the current amount of \$6,866, the voucher would grow to \$5,492, putting the cost of private school in reach for more low-income families.

The bill offers more incentives to corporations to fund the program and essentially removes a cap on how much they can collectively give. It also includes accountability measures — which critics deem too weak — such as disclosure of standardized test scores for voucher students at schools that have at least 30 such recipients.

"This is great legislation," Crist said at a bill signing ceremony. "It matches our

students with the right school."

But the reaction from critics was swift.

"It's gone too far," said Pinellas School Board member Linda Lerner, who was among the plaintiffs in the successful effort to overturn the first voucher program. "It's time to get legal opinion about a legal challenge."

With little marketing, the number of students using tax-credit vouchers has grown an average of 22 percent a year for five years, said Jon East, spokesman for Step Up for Students, the Tampa-based outfit that provides the scholarships.

"Our sense is, the demand is there," East said.

So is the support. Over time, tax-credit vouchers have quietly won over Democratic lawmakers, who nearly all opposed them just a few years ago. In the Senate, four of 14 Democrats backed SB 2126. In the House, 20 of 44 Democrats did.

"I am a great fan of the public schools," said Rep. Bill Heller, D-St. Petersburg, one of three Democratic lawmakers to attend the bill signing. "But there are some kids it doesn't reach. For those kids, this is an opportunity."

Some observers say a growing army of voucher families is likely to lock in

current Democratic support and maybe even increase it.

The more families that obtain vouchers, the thinking goes, the harder it will be for lawmakers to tell constituents no.

At the same time, some wonder whether the growing profile of vouchers for poor families will inevitably lead middle-class families to ask: *Why can't we get a voucher, too?*

"I would hope that people would ask that question," said Clark Neily, senior attorney for the Institute for Justice, a libertarian public interest law firm that supports "universal vouchers." "I don't think there's any natural reason for there to be a stopping point."

On the other hand, polls show most families are happy with their schools, said Sherman Dorn, an education professor at the University of South Florida. So they're more likely to see vouchers as a threat, not an opportunity.

"The question is . . . how will people who are not receiving vouchers frame the issue," he said. "Will they frame it as 'I'm not getting mine?' Or as, 'Hey this is diluting support for local public schools?'"

There is no proposal for universal vouchers in Florida. But leading voucher

#### Details of the tax-credit vouchers

» Tax-credit vouchers are available to students whose families meet the income thresholds for free or reduced price lunch. For the 2010-11 school year, that means a monthly income of \$2,247 for a household of two, \$2,823 for a household of three and \$577 extra for each additional person in the household.

» The voucher, or scholarship, is worth \$3,950, but is expected to grow to \$4,118 this fall and \$5,400 by 2013-14.

» There are 27,700 tax-credit scholarships now used in 1,017 private schools statewide.

» 81 percent of the schools accepting tax-credit vouchers are faith-based.

» 77 percent of the students using the scholarships are minorities; 60 percent are from single-parent households

» For more information or to apply for a scholarship, go to [www.stepupforstudents.org](http://www.stepupforstudents.org)

supporters like former Gov. Jeb Bush have dodged the question. And other supporters say it's not far-fetched to imagine lawmakers proposing vouchers that could be used by a broader base of students.

This year's Legislature, in fact, is still mulling a proposed constitutional amendment that would make it easier for public money to be sent to private schools.

"The politics could coalesce toward (a more far-reaching voucher) at some point," said East with Step Up For Students.

But the impulse, he added, would be different than the one that spawned tax-credit vouchers, which are designed for low-income families whose school choice options are limited.

Even if vouchers for all isn't on the radar, the possi-

bility is again sparking calls for litigation to nix the existing programs.

Ron Meyer, lawyer for the Florida Education Association, said the tax-credit program has the same constitutional flaws as the program struck down by the Florida Supreme Court in 2006. Asked why a lawsuit hasn't been filed, he said, "Litigation policy is determined by clients, not their lawyers."

FEA spokesman Mark Pudlow said the group is "very concerned" about the "expansion of vouchers and this parallel school system." But he said the FEA has not committed to filing suit.

"We have a lot of balls in the air right now," Pudlow said. "We have made no decisions."

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