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More Florida parents using state scholarships to send children to private schools



PATRICK FARRELL / MIAMI HERALD

Zobeyda Morales with her three month-old baby Jocelyn Arauz on her lap, is sending her other three children, Nathalie Morales 6, Tyrese Blanco 12, and Kyra Morales, to private school with publicly financed scholarships. The kids receive scholarships to attend La Progressive Presbyterian, a private school in Little Havana.

By KATHLEEN MCGRORY
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Zobeyda Morales felt helpless when her daughter Kyra struggled in kindergarten.

“She wasn’t reading,” said Morales, a single mother of four. “I wanted something better for her, but I couldn’t afford a private school.”

That was until Morales learned about Florida’s scholarship program for children from low-income families. The scholarships are funded by corporate donors, which receive a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for their contributions.

Morales applied and was accepted. She enrolled her kids in La Progresiva Presbyterian School in Little Havana.

She wasn’t alone. The number of students attending private schools on tax-credit scholarships jumped 27 percent last year, reaching a record high of 51,075 kids, according to the state Department of Education. The dramatic spike was the result of 2012 legislation increasing the amount of tax

credits available. The bill prompted corporations to donate more money.

There was also a surge in parent demand, said Doug Tuthill, of Step Up for Students, the non-profit that administers the scholarships.

“So many parents are interested that we’re struggling to keep up,” Tuthill said.

Observers say the record growth is likely to foreshadow new legislation aimed at further expanding the program.

“I would be willing to entertain a gradual increase,” said Senate Education Committee Chairman John Legg, R-Trinity.

But a proposed expansion would also stir controversy. Since its debut in 2002, the scholarship program has met resistance from some Democrats and union leaders, who consider it part of a movement to privatize public education.

“The reality is, when corporations are allowed to redirect their taxes away from state coffers, that’s money being taken away from public institutions and public education,” said Sen. Dwight Bullard, D-Miami. “In this case, the money is going to private schools that are under-regulated and not subject to the same requirements as public schools.”

‘AN EQUAL CHANCE’

The tax-credit scholarship program is part of a broader spectrum of school choice in Florida. The past two decades have seen the proliferation of magnet, virtual, and privately-managed

charter schools, as well as programs that help children from low-income families and children with disabilities attend private schools.

“Parents are increasingly expecting to be able to choose their child’s school,” said Tuthill, a former teachers union president. “Our role in all of this is to try to make sure low-income families have an equal chance to participate” by helping them access private schools.

Tax-credit scholarships are worth \$4,880 each and can be used at private schools that participate in the program. A family of four must earn less than \$44,000 in annual income to qualify.

The state limits the amount of scholarships available to families each year by limiting the amount of tax credits available to potential corporate donors.

The cap on tax credits, however, has been on the rise. In 2012, it was supposed to increase from \$175 million to \$219 million. But lawmakers voted to raise the cap even further to \$229 million, which ended up helping 10,827 additional students.

The limit for next year is \$286 million, enough to fund about 60,000 scholarships, nearly 9,000 more than this year.

The awards for 2013-14 have already been doled out, and about 5,000 children are on a waiting list. Tuthill said the waiting list could have reached 30,000, but he stopped adding names.

“I didn’t want to give the families a false sense of hope,” he said.

Sophia Dottin, of St. Petersburg,

was among the lucky parents. For the second year, she will enroll her son and daughter in Southside Christian Academy, a private school across the street from their home.

“The small class sizes have made such a difference,” Dottin said. “My daughter just finished first grade, but she can already read and write in cursive.”

The cap on tax credits is scheduled to rise steadily through 2015. But given the demand, Tuthill said he may lean on lawmakers to increase the limits even more.

‘MY MISSION’

The Legislature holds its first wave of interim committee meetings in September.

“Our mission is to provide equal opportunities to high-poverty families,” Tuthill said. “If I’m turning away 30,000 kids, if I’m not even letting them apply, then I’m in violation of my mission.”

The Foundation for Florida’s Future, the education nonprofit founded by former Gov. Jeb Bush, considers the program worthy.

“Increases in the cap have allowed the program to grow with its demand,” spokeswoman Jaryn Emhof wrote in a statement. “We want the program to keep pace, help close the achievement gap and be a success for those on the growing waiting list.”

But Rep. Erik Fresen, a Miami Republican who chairs the House Education Appropriations Subcommittee, said he would need to see student performance data before voting in favor of expansion.

“You want to make sure that choice comes with very strong accountability and very strong results,” Fresen said, noting that students in private schools don’t have to take the state’s standardized tests.

A report provided by Step Up for Students found that children in the program made the same gains in reading and math as public-school students who would be eligible for the program.

THRIVING

For the Morales family, participating in the scholarship program has been transformative. Kyra repeated kindergarten after enrolling at her new school and is now reading on grade level, her mother said.

Morales’ other children have thrived in the private-school setting, too.

“They are getting the best education possible,” she said.

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