

THE TAMPA TRIBUNE

LIFE. PRINTED DAILY.

Published Friday, February 12, 2010

Voucher bill will help kids, taxpayers

The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship has proved itself a valuable education tool since lawmakers adopted it nine years ago. Revisions proposed in legislation sponsored by Rep. Will Weatherford of Pasco County would further strengthen a program that allows poor parents to send their child to a private school.

Independent reviews show the program helps troubled students who did not do well in public schools. Yet voucher foes raised their familiar shrill objections as Weatherford filed the bill Wednesday.

"We're taking children out of the public schools and making them weaker," said state Sen. Frederica Wilson, a Miami Democrat. "This is not America."

Nonsense. The vouchers give poor children the same opportunities as children from wealthier households. Nothing could be more American. Close to 25,000 students now utilize the scholarships.

The program gives a tax credit to companies that contribute to a scholarship fund, which provides vouchers to children whose household income qualifies them for free or reduced-price lunches. An annual income of less than \$28,665 for a family of four qualified a student for free lunches last year.

The initiative now provides a student \$3,950, which is about a third of the total cost of sending a student to public school — \$12,000. The total cost includes local, state

and federal contributions plus capital expenses. The state's per-pupil funding expense is roughly \$7,000.

A legislative survey concluded the program saves taxpayers \$39 million a year.

It's true lawmakers were sloppy when they originally adopted the program, and lack of oversight led to some bad apples scamming the system. But the Legislature quickly adopted safeguards that ended the abuse.

Weatherford's proposal would further strengthen accountably. It would:

- Require a financial report from a certified accountant each year for any school that receives at least \$250,000 in scholarships.

- Empower the education commissioner to deny or remove from the scholarship program any operator who has a history of problems. This would prevent a school owner from renaming and reviving a facility with a history of problems.

- Require the test scores of any school with at least 30 scholarship students to be publicly disclosed. At present, scholarship students' progress is tracked but not broken down by school.

The provision that is generating controversy is Weatherford's plan to increase funding for the scholarships, from 60 percent to 80 percent of the state's per-pupil funding formula for public school students.

The increase is appropriate. The average annual tuition and fees for

schools participating in the scholarship program is \$6,335. Scholarship students' parents on average pay \$1,000 per child out of their own pocket. The schools generally subsidize the shortfall, which discourages private schools from participating.

The increase would ease the strain on parents and schools, yet keep the scholarships well below what the state pays for public school kids.

Another contested provision of the bill would eliminate the cap on corporations' contributions. At present, the Legislature must approve any increase to the \$118 million cap. This sensible change would enable the program to grow — or shrink — according to demand, without legislative action.

Vouchers are no threat to public schools, which will remain the choice of most parents. The Hillsborough school district, for instance, has 193,000 students, and about 93,000 qualify for the scholarships. Some 1,285 Hillsborough students use the award. Weatherford's modest funding increase won't dramatically alter those numbers.

Some students simply fare better in private schools. Vouchers give motivated poor parents the same chance to pick the best school for their child as wealthy parents. That is a noble goal and one that lawmakers should pursue by supporting Weatherford's legislation.

