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EDITORIAL

Scholarships: More support is justified

Florida's neediest students, who often live near failing schools, need more choices.

That is why a new bill in the Florida Legislature seeks to strengthen a program that provides scholarships for students.

Rep. Will Weatherford, R-Panama City, a Jacksonville University graduate, has submitted a balanced bill that will provide both accountability and support for the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship.

Last year, almost 25,000 Florida students took advantage of the scholarship.

According to Step Up for Students, a nonprofit that oversees the scholarships:

- Three-fourths were students of color.
- Three-fifths came from single-

parent homes.

- Average household income was just \$25,400, yet families still spent an average of \$1,000 a year to cover the gap between the scholarship and private school costs.

The maximum scholarship of \$3,950 doesn't come close to meeting most school costs.

Weatherford's bill includes:

More accountability: Publicly disclose test gains of any school with at least 30 tax-credit students. Give the education commissioner more power to prevent the reopening of a school when the operator has a history of being suspended or revoked by the state.

Boost scholarships: Raise the maximum amount to about half the total cost of a public school student. This would be done gradually over

four years.

Diversify revenue sources: Add new potential tax sources for credits without increasing the total program cap.

Scholarships are funded by corporations; they receive tax credits in return for contributions to the scholarships.

Set income limits: Base scholarships as a percentage of household income.

State reports indicate that this scholarship program saves the state money. These scholarships should not be viewed as threats to public education but simply another choice for students who need them the most.

The program deserves to be supported for its balance and accountability.