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NEWS-HERALD EDITORIAL

Expand opportunities

Since its inception eight years ago, Florida's Tax Credit Scholarship (aka Step Up for Students) has been a popular and successful way to extend K-12 educational opportunities to poor and disadvantaged children. But it is suffering from growing pains.

The Legislature must allow the program to keep pace with parental demand while ensuring the money is being spent appropriately.

The program gives a tax credit to companies that contribute to a scholarship fund, which provides vouchers to poverty-level students to attend private schools using vouchers worth $3,950. That's about a third of what the state and federal governments combine to spend per pupil on Florida public schools. Corporations receive a 100-percent credit on the portion of their state income tax that they donate to nonprofit alternative education programs.

However, the value of the scholarships isn't keeping pace with the cost of education. The average annual private school tuition has climbed to $6,335, and the amount of the scholarship has increased only twice in eight years. Meanwhile, the number of voucher students has increased from 10,500 in 2004 to nearly 25,000 last year.

Rep. Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, introduced a bill last week that would increase the amount of the voucher over the next four years to $5,492, which is about 80 percent of the state's per-pupil funding for public education. That would mean lower out-of-pocket costs for recipients to make up the difference between the scholarship and tuition.

Furthermore, it would eliminate the Legislature-approved cap on corporations' contributions, which is currently $118 million. Instead, the contributions would automatically rise or fall based on demand for the program, which is as it should be.

In addition, Weatherford would mandate additional transparency from scholarship schools in the form of financial reports and test score disclosures. The state education commissioner would have the power to prohibit schools with compliance problems from participating.

Critics were quick to accuse the Weatherford bill of undermining public education — as if keeping students in their failing government schools is somehow noble and productive. The Tax Credit Scholarship simply gives poor families a choice.

Studies also have shown that the program saves the state money. In 2008, Florida's Office of Program Policy Analysis and Governmental Accountability (OPPAGA), the Legislature's watchdog agency, concluded that the vouchers for low-income students saved taxpayers $38.9 million the previous year. Studies by two other non-governmental groups, Florida Tax-Watch and the Collins Center for Public Policy at Florida State University, reached similar conclusions.

Last August, Hillsborough County's public schools and its teachers union announced they would support the voucher program by helping train private school teachers. Officials said they felt a responsibility for every student in the district and wanted them to get the best possible education, wherever that may be.

That's the right attitude. Too often education funding is seen as belonging to institutions and bureaucracies, when it really belongs to the children and their families. Money should follow the students, with their parents deciding how it would best be spent to meet their interests.

The Weatherford bill will help ensure the neediest families have that choice.