

March 10, 2004

Capitol Rally Urges Support For Private School Vouchers

By Alisa Ulferts



Students cheer and wave signs during a rally supporting private school voucher programs Tuesday in Tallahassee. Parents and teachers also showed their support.

About 3,000 students, parents, teachers and administrators flooded the Capitol courtyard Tuesday to urge lawmakers to support private school voucher programs.

The state's voucher program has come under fire from state financial and law enforcement officials, who accuse the Department of Education of lax oversight. But parents who spoke at the rally said moving their children to a private school has greatly improved their performance, and they asked lawmakers to keep supporting the program.

"I'm not against public schools. I just want what's best for my grandson," said St. Petersburg resident James Golden.

Golden and his wife, Elvira, have custody of 6-year-old Deonte Lumpkin.

Deonte wasn't doing well in public kindergarten, so the Goldens put him in Yvonne Reed Christian School.

"In 19 days he was reading," Golden said.

The Goldens couldn't get a voucher and are paying the tuition this year. But they hope to qualify for a voucher next year.

"I'm not saying he'll be in private school forever. Just to give him a lift," Golden said.

Gov. Jeb Bush spoke at the rally, promising full support to private schools.

"As long as I'm governor, public education and private education will be the priority of the state," he told the crowd.

Reforms of the way private schools account for public money are needed, Bush said, but can't be allowed to encroach on the independence of the private school

system.

“Why should it be based on income that a parent should be limited in the choices they have?” Bush asked.

Senate President Jim King and House

Speaker Johnnie Byrd also spoke and pledged continued support for the program. Education Commissioner Jim Horne did not speak but met later with parents and students. •
