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Cheering for choice: Students lead rally for voucher program

By Diane Hirth



Students, parents and teachers don T-shirts and wave signs to show their support from school choice during the Step Up for Students rally Tuesday. At right, Gov Jeb Bush acknowledges the crowd gathered for the rally. "As long as I'm governor, we will have school choice in this state," Bush said.

Waving signs saying "Free to Choose My School," "I Love My Scholarship" and "Future Taxpayer, Vote Yes," children using state money and tax credits to attend private schools marched on the Capitol on Tuesday.

With parents and teachers in tow, the kids formed a crowd of several thousand supporting Florida's decision under Gov. Jeb Bush's administration to use \$120 million in taxpayer dollars and corporate tax credits to pay for private education. More than 25,000 children are in the voucher program, including students who transferred out of failing public schools, low-income pupils eligible for **corporate tax-credit** scholarships and children with learning disabilities.

"I love to read," said 6-year-old Asha Preston, who attends Tallahassee's Metropolitan Christian Academy of the Arts on a corporate tax-credit scholarship. She came to the rally with her mother, Guerline Preston, who calls the scholarship "a godsend," and said, "I like the fact (the school) is small and the staff is very approachable."

As children's whoops gave the event the feel of a pep rally, state Republican leaders told the crowd that vouchers are here to stay. They barely mentioned holding private schools accountable for how they use voucher funds and how well their students perform academically. Some schools have tarnished the program by misappropriating funds. Most use achievement tests, but not

the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test required at public schools.

"To me it's as American as apple pie that parents be given a wide array of choices for their children," Bush told the rally. "More choices creates more opportunities. It makes all schools better.

"We have the largest school-choice program in the country, and I am very proud of it," Bush said. "As long as I'm governor, we will have school choice in this state."

Seeking reform Bush said there would be reforms of the voucher program, yet added, "What won't happen is the independence of private schools be impeded on and trampled on."

Voucher-reform legislation has yet to be acted upon this legislative session, despite Senate President Jim King's highlighting it as one of his priorities.

King, R-Jacksonville, who created the corporate tax-credit scholarship, has blamed its flaws on not enough teeth in state law regarding voucher programs. On the session's opening day, King said, "We have to put a stop to those who've taken advantage of unintended loopholes and personally profited at the expense of our children." He called for frequent reporting, uniform audits, fiscal soundness and "mandating the testing of (voucher) scholarship students."

On Tuesday, though, King was a cheerleader. "You are living proof that dreams, if enacted, can come true," he told the crowd. "All we expect of you is to be

missionaries for this program."

Senate Minority Leader Ron Klein, D-Boca Raton, who supports voucher reforms, said whether they happen would be up to Bush. "If the governor doesn't want accountability in the voucher program, it's not going to happen," Klein said.

"We are not afraid of accountability," said principal and teacher Lynn Washington of Adventist Christian Academy in Tallahassee, which has 15 students on

corporate tax-credit scholarships. "We're ready for auditors to come in. We think it's a good thing."

Carmen Rivero, mother of two sons attending Kissimmee's Heartland Christian Academy on tax-credit scholarships, is just glad her fifth-grader, Henry, got the chance to switch from a public school, where he was being bullied and doing poorly, to a private school that has improved his grades.

"He loves to go to school. Before, he invented being sick. He didn't want to go."

FLORIDA'S VOUCHER PROGRAM

Opportunity scholarships for children transferring from failing public schools: 635 students

Corporate tax-credit scholarships for low-income students: 11,552

McKay scholarships for learning disabled: 13,354

Source: Florida Department of Education

Contact Capitol Bureau reporter Diane Birth at (850) 222-6729 or dhirth@tallahassee.com.
