

# THE TAMPA TRIBUNE

Education

March 10, 2004

## School Choice Fans March On Capitol

By ALLISON NORTH JONES

---

At least 2,000 parents, students, teachers and other school choice advocates gathered Tuesday in Tallahassee to tout Florida's voucher programs and encourage lawmakers to continue supporting them.

In what organizers called the largest school choice rally in the nation, families and educators gathered on the steps of the Capitol to hear success stories and promises from lawmakers that school choice will continue.

The programs use taxpayer dollars to send low-income children to private schools.

"There's no place else in the country where political leadership matched by parent involvement has advocated the reforms that we have," Gov. Jeb Bush said. "This is the largest school choice program in the country."

Bush also told the roaring crowd, "As long as I am governor we will have school choice."

Tuesday's event marked the second year advocates staged the rally during the annual Legislative session.

Chartered buses from across the state brought voucher supporters to Tallahassee for the "Step Up for Students" rally.

John Kirtley, a Tampa businessman who helped create the program and operates a number of organizations that pay for voucher scholarships, said the new title for the rally is part of an effort to "bring a new brand name" to the voucher programs.

### Programs Face Criticism

The rally comes on the heels of a series of

blows to Florida's private school voucher initiative, the hallmark of a Republican-led drive to expand school choice with tax dollars. The program is frequently lambasted by Democrats, and over the past year newspaper reports yielded several investigations, including one by the state's chief financial officer, Tom Gallagher, a Republican.

Bush said Tuesday that lawmakers will develop changes to address concerns, saying the Legislature will develop "common sense" accountability measures this year.

But, he warned, "What won't happen is private schools won't begin to look like public schools, the independence of private schools will not be impeded or trampled upon."

Lawmakers said the crowd gathered at the Capitol was proof that giving parents a choice in where their children go to school works.

"Public schools are better. Private schools are better," Bush said.

"Any doubting Thomases that still exist only have to visit the schools I have. ... You have proven us right," said Senate President Jim King, R-Jacksonville.

### 2 Scholarships Fund Vouchers

Most of the students at Tuesday's rally attend private schools through the Corporate Income Tax Credit Program, which gives corporations a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for funding scholarships that send children from low-income families to private schools or McKay Opportunity

Scholarships, which help pay private school tuition for students with disabilities. Parents say the scholarships are priceless and urged lawmakers to continue and even expand them.

“Without these scholarships, this kid would have been a statistic,” Lorri Westphal

of Tampa said of her 14-year-old son, Gregory. Now a student at Tampa Street School on a McKay scholarship, Gregory couldn't read when he attended public school.

“There's no doubt in my mind, he would have served jail time.” •

---