

Voucher 'army' grows

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A few years ago, the Pinellas County School District told Shannon Coates that her daughter Taylor might have to be bused 45 minutes from home. Taylor was going into kindergarten. She had asthma and was prone to seizures.

Coates said, "I don't think so."

Instead, the single mom enrolled Taylor in a Christian school in St. Petersburg, using a state voucher program to pay most of the cost.

She has been a staunch defender of vouchers ever since.

"I was forced to put her into this setting," said Coates, who spoke at a voucher rally in Tallahassee last year. "But now I see that this is a better fit for her."

This year, Taylor is one of 462 students in Pinellas attending private school with a corporate-tax-credit scholarship, often called a voucher. That's a tiny fraction of the 106,000 public school students in Pinellas, or even the 20,000 students who attend private school here.

And yet, there are enough of them now to be a force.

Vouchers raise tough, tangled questions about race and religion, fairness and funding, school choice and social responsibility.

In Florida, they've been flying under the radar for two years, ever since the state Supreme Court ruled against one of the state's three voucher programs in January 2006. Critics declared victory, but the decision did not affect the other programs, which have quietly continued to grow.

Now vouchers are returning to the spotlight.

Gov. Charlie Crist is expected soon to sign legislation that will substantially expand the tax-credit program, which now

serves 20,000 low-income students statewide. Meanwhile, two proposed constitutional amendments that affect vouchers will be on the statewide ballot this fall, setting up a political knife fight already attracting national attention.

In coming months, both sides will repeat the same arguments they've made for years.

The difference now is, one side has a growing army.



Using a voucher, Shannon Coates, right, enrolled daughter Taylor Barnes at Classical Christian School for the Arts in Pinellas Park rather than have her bused 45 minutes to a Pinellas public school.

Questions of value abound

Questions persist about whether vouchers help individual students academically. Or whether, through competition, they make public schools better.

But Dawn Judd has all the proof she needs.

Two years ago, she got tax-credit vouchers for her two children - Brandon, 15, and Lindsey, 14 - so they could attend Indian Rocks Christian School in Largo.

Tax-credit vouchers are funded by corporations that donate money for scholarships in return for tax credits. They're available to virtually any student who qualifies for free or reduced lunch, which is tens of thousands of students in Pinellas alone.

For Judd, the final straw came when Lindsey, then a student at Osceola Middle, told her about a student throwing a desk at a teacher. Judd said she couldn't help but think of what happened when she attended Pinellas Park High School in 1988 and students fatally shot an assistant principal.

"The first thing I thought was, 'It's going to continuously get worse,'" she said.

Indian Rocks has been especially good for Brandon, she said. Now in 10th grade, he's still not an A-B student. But thanks to more one-on-one attention and a Christian-based education, he's more engaged than he was in public schools, she said.

"When they took prayer out of school, they took God out of schools," Judd said. "Have they gone uphill since then?"

Church vs. state?

The vast majority of schools that accept students with tax-credit vouchers are religious schools. In Pinellas, one school says on its Web site it was "envisioned by its founders to be a lighthouse, spreading the light of Jesus Christ throughout the

community." Another promises to be "the premier God-glorifying school in Pinellas County."

Critics cringe. They say vouchers violate constitutional separation of church and state. In 2004, a state appeals court agreed.

But like the Supreme Court ruling that followed it, that decision applied to only one of the state voucher programs. And so far, opponents have not filed suit against the tax-credit program.

Meanwhile, there's this complicating factor: Some voucher-accepting schools are not religious.

In Palm Harbor, Suncoast Waldorf School offers its students - including 14 with tax-credit vouchers - plenty of art, music and playtime. "Education is not about filling an empty bucket," its Web site says, "but about igniting a spark of interest in the world."

Like many private schools, Suncoast offers a smaller campus, smaller class sizes and an atmosphere free from high-stakes testing, things many voucher parents say they want but don't get in public schools.

"Come to our school and you'll see every other kid hanging out in a tree," said Kate Capra, who got a voucher for her 6-year-old son, Austen. "We don't really push academics down the throat of a first-grader."

Lawmakers support program

For the first time ever this year, a sizable number of Democrats in the Legislature voted for vouchers.

In fact, a third of them voted to expand the tax-credit program, including three representatives from Pinellas: Bill Heller and Darryl Rouson of St. Petersburg and Janet Long of Seminole.

Heller voted against the bill in committee, but changed his mind after meeting voucher parents at Yvonne C. Reed Christian School in St. Petersburg.

He recalled one mother in particular who told him how much better her son was doing.

"He's got success," Heller said. "And how long would he have gone and deteriorated in the public school?"

Voucher critics point to cold, hard facts.

"This stuff has never been evaluated," said Mark Pudlow, spokesman for the state teachers union, referring specifically to tax-credit vouchers. Supporters "believe they are doing good, but there is no proof."

After being prodded by critics for years, the Legislature in 2006 passed legislation requiring students who accept tax-credit vouchers to take an annual standardized test. But the first analysis of their test score gains probably won't be done until early 2009.

In the meantime, the army grows.

Coates, the mother from St. Petersburg, transferred her daughter this year from the Yvonne C. Reed school in St. Petersburg to the Classical Christian School of the Arts in Pinellas Park. The school offers classes that cater to Taylor's love of dance. And she doesn't want her daughter in public schools that appear to be resegregating under Pinellas' new student assignment plan.

"I didn't just pick a school out of a hat," she said. "I looked for the school that was best for her."

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BY THE NUMBERS

School vouchers

462 students in Pinellas receiving tax credit scholarships

37 Pinellas private schools accepting students with tax credit scholarships

19,416 Tax credit scholarships statewide last fall

5,000 Approximate number of additional scholarships that will be likely next year if Gov. Crist signs the voucher expansion bill

64 percentage of scholarship recipients who are black or Hispanic

FAST FACTS

More information

To find out more about corporate tax credit scholarships, call the Department of Education's parent information hotline at 1-800-447-1636.

More by the numbers

82 percent of participating private schools are religious

3,950 dollar value of a tax credit scholarship under the new legislation

\$118-million is the new annual cap on corporate tax credit contributions under the new legislation (up from \$88-million currently)