

## DeSantis signs bill creating Florida's fifth school voucher program

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Gov. Ron DeSantis signed into law on Thursday Florida's fifth school voucher program, creating a path for up to 18,000 more students to receive state scholarships to attend private school and expanding what is already the nation's largest school-choice effort.

The new Family Empowerment Scholarship "will help children realize their potential and give parents the power to do what is best for their children," DeSantis said on Twitter.

The governor touted the new, and controversial, voucher program in cross-state visits to three private Christian schools that take Florida's other school scholarships, often dubbed vouchers.

He first stopped in Jacksonville, then in St. Petersburg and signed the bill at a Seventh-day Adventist school in Miami Gardens, completing what his press office described on Twitter as "victory lap for Florida parents and students!"

DeSantis and Republican leaders in the Florida Legislature pushed the new program as one of their key priorities during the just-ended 2019 legislative session in Tallahassee.

They said it would help children from low-income families whose parents are unhappy with their assigned public school but cannot afford private school. The new scholarship program could serve children in middle-class families, too, with the income limit set at nearly \$80,000 for a family of four.

The new scholarship program is estimated to cost the state \$130 million, with the cost per child set at 95 percent of that spent on a public-school education. It will start in the 2019-20 school year.

Most Democrats in the House and Senate voted against the education bill (SB 7070), criticizing Florida's voucher programs as vehicles for sending public money to private, often religious, schools that do not have to meet the standards on academics, teacher credentials or facilities the state imposes on public schools.

Private schools that take the scholarships, for example, do not need to hire teachers who've earned college degrees while public schools must hire instructors who have both earned bachelor's degrees and passed state certification exams.

More than 140,000 students currently attend private schools using Florida's existing scholarship programs -- Gardiner, Hope, McKay and Tax Credit. And more than 80 percent of them attend religious schools, state figures show.

The Florida Education Association, the statewide teachers union, has long criticized Florida's voucher programs and did the same with its newest one, saying state leaders' "most significant education initiative is a massive new giveaway of public funds" to "unaccountable institutions."

The union and other groups upset by the expansion of school voucher programs -- which, in their view, comes at the detriment of public schools -- plan a statewide summit May 18 in Orlando to address what they call an “attack” on public education.

The Southern Poverty Law Center’s Florida office, which advocates for students, sent a letter to DeSantis on Thursday urging him veto the bill and the scholarship expansion. The group called voucher programs a “costly experiment” that haven’t proven to benefit students.

The new scholarship was pushed as a way to help youngsters on the waiting list for the tax credit scholarship, which is Florida’s largest voucher program, serving about 100,000 students.

The program has about 14,000 on its waiting list this year, officials said, proof to proponents that parents want options outside their assigned public school.

Sen. Manny Diaz, R-Hialeah, who championed the new law in the Senate, was with DeSantis for the bill signing ceremony and called Thursday a “historic day” for Florida’s students.

“The Family Empowerment Scholarship will provide quality choices for all students regardless of Zip-Code or Socio-economic status !” he wrote on Twitter.

The tax-credit program is funded by corporate donations given in exchange for a dollar-for-dollar write-off on state tax bills. But donations have slowed, officials said, creating a wait list for the program, which is serving fewer students this year than last.

The new family empowerment scholarship will be funded directly from the state budget, which opponents argued makes it more vulnerable to lawsuits given that the state constitution prohibits public money going “in aid” of religious institutions.

But DeSantis and other Republican proponents, citing both the unchallenged existing programs and the more conservative justices now on the Florida Supreme Court, have said they are not worried about lawsuits.

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