

12 SC private schools OK'd for 'choice' program

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The State government purchased 342 new school buses, the first such purchase since 2008. Each new bus cost \$82,030, with the bulk of the funds coming from the State Lottery. The new buses are twenty-nine percent more fuel efficient than those they replace and have a host of upgrades including air conditioning, highback seats, emergency windows, handicap accessibility, and greater capacity.

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Twelve S.C. private schools have been cleared to enroll special-needs students paying with tuition grants made possible through the state's first school-choice program.

"That list will grow," said Melanie Barton, director of the state Education Oversight Committee, the state agency tasked with approving schools for participation in the program.

Starting Jan. 1, South Carolinians can claim a tax credit for donations made to organizations that give grants to special-needs students to go to private schools. The tax credit is the state's first school-choice program following years of failed legislative efforts to pass similar proposals.

The law limits participation to private schools that are members in good standing with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, the S.C. Association of Christian Schools or the S.C. Independent Schools Association.

So far, 12 schools have been accepted to take part in the program, including the Columbia Jewish Day School, Sandhills School and the Barclay School in Columbia. Schools in Anderson, Charleston, Florence, Greenville, North Augusta, Rock Hill, Russellville and Sumter also were approved.

The Oversight Committee contacted more than 200 private schools about participating. Most have not responded yet, but Barton said more are expected to apply.

Participating schools must submit documentation to the state showing they meet certain standards, including having programs serving special-needs students and regularly testing students to gauge their progress, said Dana Yow, the Oversight Committee's communications director.

In the state budget starting July 1, lawmakers approved up to \$8 million in tax credits for donations made to organizations that give private-school scholarships to special-needs students. The program will have to be approved again next year to continue.

The grants would be for tuition or \$10,000, whichever is lower.

So far, three organizations plan to take donations and offer grants.

- Columbia-based Advance Carolina will provide grants to students to attend schools belonging to the S.C. Association of Christian Schools, said Edward Earwood, executive director of both organizations.
- The Roman Catholic Diocese of Charleston is forming a scholarship-funding organization to assist students in attending Charleston-area Catholic schools, said Jacqueline Kasproski, the diocese's associate director for secondary education and principal of Columbia's Cardinal Newman School. At least six or seven Catholic schools provide services for special-needs students, she said.
- Palmetto Kids First Scholarship Program of Mount Pleasant plans on filling another niche, said Jeff Davis, a consultant working with the group and a tax attorney who helped similar organizations in Georgia. The organization plans on providing grants to students to attend schools who are not members of the Catholic Diocese or Association of Christian Schools.

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