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Senator readies Bright Futures tour

The Republican plans to use the campaign to remind lawmakers that they promised to fund the scholarship program.

By ALISA ULFERTS, Times Staff Writer
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TALLAHASSEE - Republican state Sen. Ken Pruitt took aim Monday at unnamed GOP House members, first accusing them of jeopardizing Florida's Bright Futures program and then launching a campaign to preserve the popular scholarships.

Pruitt's Brighter Futures Express Educational Tour will travel the state in a secondhand yellow school bus purchased by a Fort Lauderdale educational nonprofit group. His purpose: to remind fellow lawmakers of the promise they made to Floridians, the Port St. Lucie Republican said.

"Here's the bad news: That pledge is being challenged today by some politicians in Tallahassee who want to break the promise," Pruitt says in a video produced for the tour in which he is shown walking between stacks of library books.

Pruitt fought attempts by House leaders this year to curb the scholarship program, which strains the state budget but survived unchanged. Pruitt said Monday he wanted to build momentum so lawmakers don't whittle at Bright Futures during the 2004 legislative session, which begins in March.

He's aided by the Brighter Futures Foundation, a nonprofit education advocacy group founded in 1999 under the name Partnership for Better School Funding. Pruitt is chairman of the group, which purchased the school bus for Pruitt's tour.

House Democrats endorsed Pruitt's campaign but criticized House Republicans more harshly.

"Sen. Pruitt's efforts were critical last year and are needed again if we are to preserve these scholarships from thoughtless House Republican attempts to destroy them," said House Democratic Leader Doug Wiles, D-St. Augustine.

"Any Republican attempts to dismantle these scholarships next year will be met with the full opposition of House Democrats, fighting with thoughtful Republicans, on behalf of Florida's families," Wiles added.

But Republican House Majority Leader Marco Rubio, R-West Miami, was quick to point out that Wiles voted against a state budget that added \$16-million to the program.

Several proposals to cut the scholarship program surfaced last year but none got very far. Some lawmakers suggested that students whose family income was greater than \$75,000 be ineligible for the program.

Also suggested were tougher academic standards and capping the amount students could get in assistance.

Pruitt has made Bright Futures a key part of his campaign to become Senate president in 2006. But he said the Brighter Futures Foundation, whose donors are secret, is separate from a group that has raised more than \$600,000 for that bid. Most of that money has come from donors he refuses to identify.

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