

Illinois tax credit scholarships on hold after website crashes

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More than 24,000 families across Illinois were unable to submit applications to the state's new private school scholarship program because the online registration system shut down due to "extreme demand." | AP file photo

More than 24,000 Illinois families were unable to submit applications to the state's new private school scholarship program because the online registration system shut down due to "extreme demand."

Empower Illinois is one of the organizations overseeing the Tax Credit Scholarship program, which was made available through the Invest in Kids Act.

"We knew the demand for quality educational options was strong, but no one estimated the overwhelming statewide demand we saw today," Empower Illinois said on its website.

“Parents get one chance at a quality education, and thousands took every opportunity to make sure their kids were first in line.”

Lawmakers approved the controversial \$75 million tax credit program last year as part of a school funding overhaul. It aims to assist families with certain incomes by offering scholarships that cover 50 percent to 100 percent of the cost to send a child to private school.

Empower Illinois said Wednesday that it didn’t have an estimate for when applications could be accepted online again.

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“Unfortunately, we do not yet have an update on when the student application will relaunch,” Empower Illinois posted on its Facebook page. “We apologize for the inconvenience this has caused students and families.”

Michael Lane, of Galapagos Rockford Charter School, said he’s frustrated for the parents who took off from work and came to his two schools to apply.

“Some parents spent three or four hours trying to get this done, and now they have to do it again,” Lane said. “I’m surprised they weren’t prepared for this kind of response. Anytime you say something like this is first-come, first-serve, you’re going to get thousands of people.”

The program is funded through private donations. Donors expect to receive tax credits, an incentive from Illinois that encourages participation.

Gov. Bruce Rauner announced last month that taxpayers pledged more than \$36 million to the program on the first day donors became eligible for the tax credit.

Critics of the tax credit have argued that it takes money away from often cash-strapped public schools to benefit the wealthy.