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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

VerSteeg column overlooked key school shift in Florida

In his passionate defense of public education (“Public education a priority in name only for Florida,” Sunday column) Deputy Editor of the Editorial Page Jac Wilder VerSteeg rightfully calls on voters to pay attention at the ballot box. We also should not ignore the lever parents already are pulling. Throughout Florida, they are choosing where their children attend school.

This growing phenomenon reflects the desire of parents to tailor education to the needs of each child. In Florida, 736,000 students attend magnet programs, career academies and choice and open-enrollment schools. Another 350,000 choose charter schools or take online courses or college classes through dual enrollment. Almost 140,000 4-year-olds and 22,000 disabled students use public money to attend private schools.

Mr. VerSteeg questions whether one such program, the Tax Credit Scholarship for 38,500 low-income students, should be offered in faith-based schools. His question is really broader. Programs serving pre-kindergartners, disabled students and low-income students all include faith-based schools, and several college scholarships, including Bright Futures, send state money to religious institutions. So the courts will decide whether these programs are constitutional and, at least in the case of the tax-credit scholarship, the U.S.

Supreme Court has signaled its approval twice in the past decade.

The more important standard is whether they work. With the tax-credit scholarship, the state has determined that it is being chosen mostly by children who are struggling in their public school. Standardized tests show that these students are achieving the same gains as students of all income levels nationally. Last year, they also made slightly larger gains than their public school counterparts, scores the state's researcher said “are larger and more statistically significant than in the past year's results, suggesting that successive cohorts of participating students may be gaining ground over time.”

This new generation of parents is less interested in who runs the school than in whether it works for their children. In that sense, they already are voting — for their child's school.

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Editor's note: Doug Tuthill is president of Step Up For Students, which, according to its website, “provides legislatively authorized K-12 scholarship programs and related support to give economically disadvantaged families the freedom to choose the best learning options for their children.”