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MY WORD DOUG TUTHILL

Tax-credit scholarship expands options

Public education in Florida is under enormous pressure to improve at a time when school districts are being squeezed financially. The anguish of district leaders is understandable. But that is no reason to blame low-income parents for wanting options (“Seminole schools blast tax-credit scholarships,” Orlando Sentinel, Dec. 23).



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The Florida tax-credit scholarship was created in 2001 to provide students on free or reduced-price lunch with learning options, and the Legislature provides dollar-for-dollar tax credits for contributions that fund the \$4,011 scholarships. But no one forced the parents of nearly 38,000 mostly black and Hispanic children on the scholarship this school year to apply. No one insisted they pay upwards of \$1,000 to cover the gap between scholarship and tuition.

So when Seminole schools Superintendent Bill Vogel says the program is “part of the agenda” to weaken public schools, he is not only attacking the bipartisan legislative coalition that supports it. He is also telling some desperately poor parents that their schooling choices are wrong — even though public education is about equal opportunity.

This scholarship is part of an increasingly cus-

tomized public-education system. In Florida, 736,000 students attend magnet programs, career academies, choice and open-enrollment schools; 154,000 choose charter schools, and 140,000 4-year-olds use public funds to attend private schools.

District officials are right to call for accountability. To that end, scholarship students take nationally norm-referenced tests, and their schools answer to parents who help pay tuition. From such oversight, we know students who choose the scholarship are the lowest performers from their district schools and that their test-score gains now match students of all income levels nationally. These same students receive 64 cents on the public-school dollar, which is why four independent organizations have concluded the program saves tax money.

These are challenging times for public education, but to label scholarships for impoverished children “a travesty” is the kind of hyperbole that cheapens public discourse. Only 53 percent of low-income children read at grade level, and the ones who choose this scholarship are doing worse than the rest. Their parents don’t care about a school’s corporate governance; they simply want schools that work for their children.

What’s wrong with that?

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