

Student vouchers are no threat to public education

point
of view

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Florida needs a thriving public education system, and parents want schools that fit their own children's needs. Only in such partisan and acrimonious times could these objectives be viewed as in conflict.

Unfortunately, that is one part of the tug of war that is gripping this state as educators and legislators struggle over increasing demands and decreasing dollars.

Even the most earnest school officials fall into the trap.

Just consider the words of distinguished Duval School Board member W.C. Gentry.

"Fundamentally, (school choice) is very bothersome," Gentry told a radio audience not too long ago. "... The notion that we would effectively dismantle a system of public education and give students and parents choice to go do whatever they choose to do is anathema to the basic underpinnings of our society."

Duval district schools are providing an array of choices to parents through magnet programs and charter schools, and the trend statewide is breathtaking.

In Florida, 736,000 students now attend magnet programs, career academies, choice and open enrollment schools; and 170,000 take online courses or college classes through dual enrollment. About 170,000 students attend charter schools.

And 140,000 4-year-olds, 38,000 low-income and 22,000 disabled students attend private schools through publicly supported scholarships.

These options don't dismantle public education. They strengthen it.

Gentry need not worry about the traditional neighborhood school. It will continue to play a vital role and serves well the needs

of many families, including those who choose zoned schools through their ability to move into their preferred neighborhoods. But a new generation of parents is also asking to customize schooling, to choose options beyond just the neighborhood school.

I help run a statewide scholarship program for struggling low-income students, based in Jacksonville, that is one example.

The students who choose this scholarship, which is financed by corporate contributions that receive a dollar-for-dollar tax credit, are mostly black or Hispanic.

Three-fifths are from single-parent homes, and their average household income is only 21 percent above poverty.

These are the kind of students who typically face enormous educational odds. In Florida, little more than half of low-income students read at grade level.

The ones who end up choosing this scholarship are, according to state research, performing even worse than the rest. The private schools they pick are not necessarily any better than the schools they leave, but they're different in ways that sometimes connect.

In the first four years of nationally norm-referenced testing under this option, the students are achieving the same gains in reading and math as students of all income levels nationally.

In a tangible way, this particular scholarship expands public education's promise of equal opportunity. But the larger point is that different children learn in different ways, and public schools are responding with an increasing array of options designed to work best for each child. That is not anathema. It's progress.

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