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Parents need more control over kids' school

By Estefania Nunez-Brady

Thank God the Miami-Dade County School Board did not investigate my address. In 2003, I went to a high school where fighting was widespread. I was lucky if I wasn't accidentally hit when a brawl broke out in the hallway.

One day, in the ladies' room, another girl threatened to bash my head on the wall if I didn't stop hanging out with a guy she liked. "Please don't hit me," I said to her. "I'll stay out of your way."

She laughed. I went back to class, and tried to focus.

The next day, I saw the same girl grab another student and push her into the wall. This girl fought back, but the bully grabbed her Snapple bottle, broke it on the wall, and used a piece of glass to slash the student's face.

I was petrified. That could have been me. I went home and begged my mom to transfer me to a safer school.

My parents had only been in America for four years. Money was tight, and they didn't know the system. So my parents did something thousands of other public-school parents feel forced to do. They lied about where we lived so I could go to a school where I would feel safe.

Now, I'm reading in the Sun Sentinel that the Broward County School Board wants to investigate parents who have used a different address to register their kids in better schools. If they're caught lying about where they live, they may be charged with a felony.

I understand perjury is against the law, and the law

should be respected. But I know the parents who lie about their address are often the ones who cannot afford to move to a more affluent neighborhood, and can least afford to pay a fine or fight a felony charge.

I also understand the families who have been zoned out of a school, because it's overcrowded with students from other neighborhoods. That, too, is unfair.

That's the problem. The system is unfair.

We need a fairer system, in which parents have more control over where the kids go to school. Since I graduated, the options available to families in the neighborhood where I grew up have increased. Miami-Dade has created more magnet schools and choice programs and a growing array of charter schools. It's home to some of the most vibrant private schools in Florida, and thanks to three scholarship programs, they're now within reach for thousands more families. New options have also begun to flourish in Broward, and in the coming years, parents will have even more choices in the public school system, as open enrollment expands statewide.

Children should not have to feel stuck in a school they don't like. Parents shouldn't have to commit a felony to find a school where their child feels safe.

Our schools shouldn't leave parents with few options other than to lie. Creating new options for disadvantaged families can help our education system serve all students better.

Estefania Nunez-Brady works with Step Up For Students, a non-profit that manages Florida's tax credit scholarship program for low-income children.