FEA lawsuit saddens a loyal alumnus

Ron Sachs
MY VIEW

I am proud to have served as the communications director for the Florida Education Association — the Florida teachers union — from 1990 to 1992. That’s why I remain stunned and so saddened by the union’s misguided lawsuit to kill the successful corporate tax credit scholarship program.

This program helps over 90,000 poor, mostly minority children attend schools that better suit their needs. The average household income of scholarship families is $24,000; over 60 percent are from single parent homes. These students were the worst performers in their public schools but are now making solid, consistent academic progress.

The lawsuit’s lack of merit caused a Leon County Circuit Court judge to toss it out — and so did the First District Court of Appeal. But the FEA announced last week it would gasp its last breath by appealing to the Florida Supreme Court.

During my time at FEA, we fought to defend public schools from any threat. But this program is no threat. Opposing it with such venom dilutes the power, prestige and profile of the statewide teachers union.

Full disclosure: Our firm has spent two years working with the Alliance for School Choice to tell the positive story of the program. I’m sure I could have worked for the other side — I did in the past. But we believe this program is a vital part of public education today. We’ve met so many families whose wonderful, hopeful children are the living, breathing proof of the scholarships’ success.

This is not about some abstract, forced ideological principle on the union banner. It’s about real children who will suffer major consequences if these scholarships — their success lifeline — are taken away.

The First District Court of Appeal found the union’s claims of financial harm to public schools were totally unfounded. Independent studies have concluded the program doesn’t take a single dollar from public schools. In fact, it’s saving hundreds of millions of dollars that can be re-invested in public schools.

Union leaders should see that the program frees teachers to focus on the overall success of their class by removing students who require special attention in a unique learning environment. If FEA succeeds in its narrow, cynical argument, will they or some other plaintiff apply the same flawed principle to the McKay and Gardiner vouchers — and even to Florida’s voluntary pre-kindergarten vouchers? In all of these programs, parents use taxpayer funds to pay tuition at private, faith based schools. Another suit already targets the McKay program using the FEA’s flimsy legal theory.

Everyone agrees that public education is vital and should be strengthened in every reasonable way. But we also should agree that our children, however disadvantaged, should have every opportunity to succeed, and these scholarships help fulfill that opportunity for many.

Ignoring the pleas of 10,000 people who marched on Tallahassee to “Drop the Suit,” the FEA presses on in the immoral equivalent of a war on children. The nearly 100,000 potential child casualties this lawsuit might cost would etch the saddest, darkest chapter in the union’s mostly proud history. The FEA is spending hard-working public school teachers’ dues on multi-million-dollar legal fees to advance this suit. It’s just plain wrong.

I was once proud to be associated with an organization that tirelessly works to advance the lives of children. By pressing this lawsuit, the union blindly misses the tragic irony of causing permanent damage to the very people it purports to care the most about: kids.

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