If you watched the president's first address to a joint session of Congress, you may remember seeing a young woman who was the beneficiary of school choice. Denisha Merriweather grew up in a struggling part of Jacksonville, FL, but was able to escape generations of poverty, become the first person in her family to graduate from high school and is now completing a master's degree at the University of South Florida.

Denisha has recounted again and again how Florida's scholarship program for low-income children got her into a school that helped her beat the odds. Laura Jimenez and Samantha Batel of the Center for American Progress in Washington, D.C., recently wrote that Florida's system of choice "leaves a lot to be desired." They allege that its programs are ineffective, unpopular and that parents are somehow duped into participating.

The reality is that Florida has long been a leader in funding students—not school buildings—and serves as a model for the nation.

The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program, created in 2001, is the largest of its kind in the country—awarding more than 95,000 low-income students a $5,886 scholarship to attend the private school of their choice. This program has seen steady growth every year as more and more parents choose to enroll their children in a participating private school.

Jimenez and Batel claim that an evaluation of the program "found that participation had no meaningful effect on student performance." Yet that's not how most people, including policy experts, interpret the results. The evaluation says "the typical [scholarship] student tends to maintain his or her relative position in comparison with all students nationally both in mathematics and reading." It goes on to say that "It is important to note that these national comparisons pertain to all students nationally, and not just students from low-income families."

This is an important point, because only low-income students are eligible to participate in the program. In practice, the average family income is $24,075—or 4.4 percent above the poverty rate.

So, what the evaluation is actually saying is that the average student, who is undeniably low-income, maintains a level of academic progress similar to all students across the nation—rich and poor. And, as Jimenez and Batel admit, the low-income students participating in the program "are more likely to have been low-performing students in their previous schools."

They're right. One study compared students who applied to the program with low-income students who were eligible but chose not to apply. The study found that participants entered the program with lower math and reading score than their peers. The study also noted that participants disproportionately came from public schools with lower academic quality and higher rates of violence than nonparticipants.

This all makes sense. Why would parents go to the trouble of taking their children out of environments that are working for them?

And it's not just scholarship students who are benefiting. Another study examined whether students in public schools also benefitted from the program—and in fact they do. The study found that public school students living in areas with more private school options saw test-score gains at higher rates than students living in areas with fewer private options nearby after the program was created.

And despite claims by Jimenez and Batel, private schools in the scholarship program are far from unregulated. All participating students must take a standardized test with reports submitted to the state (producing the data and evaluation mentioned above). Also, private schools with at least 30 participating students must publicly report test score gains.

Further, participating schools must be approved by the state, must prove financial stability, conduct employee background checks and ensure compliance with all state and local health and safety codes. Teachers in participating private schools must have at least a bachelor's degree, three years of teaching experience or demonstrated expertise. And that's just to be eligible for the program. When accept-
ed, schools must provide documentation to the state every year.

The last claim by Jimenez and Batel is the most interesting: that private schools are inaccessible to low-income families. If students are not able to access private schools, how are there nearly 100,000 low-income Florida students participating?

Perhaps it is no coincidence that they failed to mention the size of Florida's choice programs. The scholarship program for low-income students, as well as two programs for students with special needs that were also attacked in the article, collectively educate more than 135,000 students statewide. Omission of these participation rates hides their immense popularity.

Unlike some school reforms, school choice is only successful if parents want to participate. If everyone is content with the public school they were assigned based on their home address, choice programs would categorically fail due to lack of interest. But as every state that offers choice can attest, the demand is high and, regrettably, waiting lists are often long.

The good news is that's rapidly changing, as successful programs for choice—and successful students like Denisha—demonstrate the remarkable impact and critical need for this important reform.

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