Bullying victims should have education options

Your Turn
Annie Bullins-Jones  Guest columnist

Three years ago, I had to make a big decision that would affect my daughter's life and future. I could either leave Emily in a public school where she was being harassed every day. Or I could use a state scholarship to put her in a private school where she was safe and could learn again.

I chose the latter. And I bet any parent in my shoes would have done the same thing.

I want to share my story in response to a TCPalm editorial that slammed a bill that would create a state scholarship to help bullying victims like Emily. The editorial claimed House Bill 1 was helping bullies instead of victims, and was teaching victims "the way to deal with your problem is to run."

In light of the turmoil Emily went through, I find that insulting. The verbal and physical assaults began as soon as she started attending Fort Pierce Westwood High School, which is her zoned school. On a daily basis, male students called her derogatory names and groped her in the hallways. One day, while she was in a stall in the girl's bathroom, a male student actually crawled under the opening in front of the stall.

I complained to school officials repeatedly, and they said they'd look into it. But the harassing behavior went on. Emily wanted to stop going to school. Her grades started suffering. I wanted to transfer her to other schools in the district, but the best I could get was a waiting list.

That wasn't good enough. Thankfully, I was able to get her a Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, which is for lower-income families. We used that to enroll her in John Carroll Catholic High School, an excellent school that's not far from us and has a reputation for ensuring its students are well-prepared for college.

What a difference that made. The harassment ended, students treated each other with respect, and my child blossomed. Emily is a straight-A student, a varsity cheerleader, and an active member of Students Against Drunk Driving. She plans to attend Florida Atlantic University and become a pediatrician. I am so proud of her. I also am so grateful she had this opportunity.

How many parents don't have this opportunity? How many students have to suffer because they don't have options?

In case somebody tries to twist this, let me be clear: I am not against public schools. In fact, I'm a former public school teacher, and I still work for a public school. My youngest is in public school, and my oldest graduated from Westwood last year. He didn't experience the problems Emily experienced. For him, the school worked.

I agree with the editorial about one thing. Schools should do more to hold bullies accountable, and to keep bullying from happening in the first place. That's a no-brainer.

But bullying victims shouldn't have to wait while schools figure it out. In other words, it's not an either-or. It makes perfect sense for schools to fight bullying at the same time options are offered to students in dire situations. If it was your child, wouldn't you want that option?

Annie Bullins-Jones lives in Fort Pierce.