Legislation would give victimized students ‘Hope’

To appreciate why children who are being tormented in school sometimes need to break free, just listen to parents who get caught in such nightmares.

Annie Bullins-Jones’ daughter was being taunted and groped in school hallways and a restroom stall in a Fort Pierce high school before she was able to take advantage of a scholarship for economically disadvantaged students and switch to a local Catholic high school. “What a difference that made,” says Bullins-Jones, a former public school teacher. “The harassment ended, students treated each other with respect, and my child blossomed.”

Toni Lee Grant’s daughter is on the autism spectrum and was mocked daily by classmates for her smaller stature, moving slowly in the hallways, taking time to unlock her locker. A special-needs scholarship allowed her daughter to switch to a smaller private Christian school where the principal personally showed her how best to open the locker. “That simple act of kindness ensured my daughter was not picked on first thing in the morning,” Grant says. “In fact, thanks to the school’s support and guidance, there has been no teasing at all.”

These parents speak to why Florida needs to give every victimized child as many schooling options as possible, and why I filed a bill for the 2018 Legislature, House Bill 1, to make that happen.

School districts do their level best to prevent bullying and to deal harshly with bullies, and we must insist that those efforts continue. But there is no reason we can’t also hear the cries of parents who are sometimes desperate to find a new environment for their children.

Simply put, this bill is not about bullies. It is about victims.

In criticizing the proposed scholarship, this newspaper acknowledges that “helping (bullied students) escape the situation literally can be lifesaving” and yet it argues the bill “addresses a symptom instead of attacking the root cause.” Worse, it demonizes these unfortunate parents by characterizing their efforts as “running from the situation.”

Fortunately, these approaches are not mutually exclusive. We can and should do everything within our power to stop bullying in its tracks. But there is no reason to turn our backs on parents who face agonizing decisions on how to provide comfort to children who get caught up in vicious and life-altering attacks.

In 2016, more than 47,000 students in Florida public schools reported being battered, bullied, harassed, assaulted or attacked. This bill gives parents the option of a transportation scholarship to another public school or a tuition scholarship to a private school. Of course, nothing prevents them from remaining in the same school.

This program is to be called the Hope Scholarship precisely because it attempts to help children for whom each school day brings anguish and fear. I know. I’ve talked to parents who live with this horror, and they’re not looking for a lecture on bullying statutes or a treatise on juvenile violence.

They just want a way out for their own children, and we owe it to them.

Donalds, R-Naples, is vice chairman of the Florida House Pre-K-12 Appropriations Subcommittee and the father of three sons.