Voucher programs an opportunity in public education

In the eyes of critics, students who benefit from school choice in Florida are “special interests.” It’s a knock oft repeated for two decades, most recently in Thursday’s editorial in the Star-Banner. But it still baffles.

The Star-Banner slammed lawmakers for creating a new scholarship to help students victimized by bullying; for finding additional funding for the Gardiner Scholarship for students with special needs; and for continuing to support the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship for lower-income students.

Poor kids. Disabled kids. Kids victimized by bullying. These are “special interests”?

Created in 2014, the Gardiner Scholarship serves students with autism, Down syndrome and a handful of other special needs. This year, it served 10,000 students for the first time. It also ran out of funding for the first time, leaving 1,300 students on a waiting list. That’s why lawmakers — who have given the program nearly universal bipartisan support — sought more funding.

The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship also reached a milestone this year, serving more than 100,000 students (including 2,079 in Marion) for the first time. Two-thirds of the students are black and Hispanic. Their average family income is $25,362 a year. We know from a decade’s worth of testing data that they were the students who struggled the most in their prior public schools, but now, in schools their parents chose for them, they’re making solid progress.

So what’s the problem? Critics repeat accusations about money siphoned from public schools and “unaccountable” private schools. They act as if no evidence exists regarding academic outcomes. But these are myths.

The amount of the tax credit scholarship is two-thirds the cost of educating the same student in a district school. That’s why every single fiscal impact study of the scholarship program — eight to date — has found it saves taxpayer money that can be re-invested in public schools.

No study has found otherwise. The evidence is so overwhelming, the courts dismissed the recent lawsuit that aimed to kill the program because, in part, the plaintiffs could provide no proof the program is harming public schools.

As for accountability, it’s true scholarship programs give parents a fair bit of discretion to drive quality.

It’s also true that finding the right balance between accountability from choice, and accountability from regulations, is a work in progress. Lawmakers strengthened state oversight of private schools this year, as they have multiple times over the past decade.

But the evidence also suggests this balanced approach is yielding positive results. An Urban Institute study released a few months ago found tax credit scholarship students are more likely to enroll in college, and earn degrees, than like students in public schools. If students secured scholarships in early grades and used them at least four years, they were 20 percent more likely to earn associate degrees.

This is progress.

Expanding options for disadvantaged kids isn’t some devious attempt to “pad private bottom lines.” For goodness sake, the vast majority of private schools are tiny non-profits. But thanks to these scholarships, thousands more parents now have the power to do what other parents do all the time, without controversy or negative headlines: Find the school that works best for their kid.

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