School choice is expanding because it’s working

By Ron Matus
Special to The Sun

Sun columnist Carl Ramey says “Just don’t get it” when it comes to why lawmakers continue to expand school choice. Perhaps he should take a hard look at his own backyard.

In the Alachua County School District, 74 percent of white students read at grade level, while only 29 percent of black students do. No school district in Florida has a bigger gap.

I’m not finger pointing. I know it’s complicated. But the sad stats do help explain why parents are clamoring for more educational options. I also don’t mean to suggest that more options are the end-all, be-all. They’re not. But they are another tool that can help more kids find success, in a way that benefits us all.

In Florida, that’s what’s happening.

Take the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship. It’s now serving 100,000 lower-income students in private schools, including 1,006 in Alachua County. More than two-thirds are black or Hispanic. Their average family income is $25,365 a year.

We know from a decade’s worth of standardized test data that these students were, on average, the lowest-performing students in their prior public schools. But now they’re now making the same annual learning gains as students of all income levels nationally.

We also know, thanks to fresh data from the left-leaning Urban Institute, that they’re more likely to enroll in college, and earn associate degrees, than like students in public schools. In fact, students who secured scholarships in early grades and used them at least four years were 29 percent more likely to earn associate degrees.

These gains are not coming at the expense of public schools, no matter how many times critics say it. But don’t take my word for it either. Look at the stack of financial studies, the recent rulings by Florida courts and research by a former star economist at the University of Florida.

To date, eight separate fiscal impact analyses, by a wide range of independent groups, have all concluded the scholarship (which is worth two-thirds of per-pupil funding in public schools) saves taxpayer money that can be reinvested in public schools.

Florida courts dismissed the recent lawsuit that sought to kill the program because, in part, the plaintiffs could provide no evidence to back up claims of harm to public schools. And according to a study by former UF researcher David Figlio (now dean of the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern), the competitive effects of the scholarship boost academic performance of students who remain in public schools.

Many of us who value school choice don’t emphasize the latter, because to us it’s not so much about competition. It’s more about equal opportunity, and basic fairness, and giving more parents, particularly the parents of kids disadvantaged by poverty or disability, more power to access a school that works best for their child.

In a world less eaten up by tribal politics, the fundamental decency of this idea would be universally embraced.

I wish I had the space to respond to Ramey’s other points, or, better yet, a means to persuade him to sit down with me over coffee at Maude’s. (My treat!)

Let me end with this: It’s true accountability isn’t structured the same for educational choice programs as it is for district schools. But there’s good reason for that.

Regulations can drive quality. So can parental choice. The rub is finding the right balance between the two. Lawmakers strengthened state oversight of scholarship programs this year, as they have many times in the past, as they undoubtedly will again.

But when giving more parents more discretion yields better outcomes at less cost, it’s absurd to argue accountability is lacking.

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