

# SCHOOL CHOICE IS A WIN FOR ALL SCHOOLS—PRIVATE OR PUBLIC



Robert Wright

I was disappointed when reading a recent opinion piece in a local publication regarding the new Family Empowerment Scholarship. The

column promoted an “us vs. them” mentality regarding school choice in Florida. At The Basilica School of Saint Mary Star of the Sea, we seek to provide for the needs of all our students. Although we are a Catholic school, we do not discriminate on religious affiliation. By law, we are prohibited from discriminating on the basis of race, color or national origin. Our ethnically diverse student body represents all kinds of socioeconomic backgrounds. We are not a school only for the “haves” – two-thirds of our students receive some form of aid.

We welcome students with special needs. In fact, in October, The Basilica School received an award for Outstanding School Partner from the Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD) sponsored by the University of Miami and Nova Southeastern University. This award also recognizes the hard work of our dedicated and certified teaching staff.

Our success can be measured by the demand for our services. In 2013, we began accepting Florida Tax Credit Scholarship students. That made a private school education affordable to scores of families seeking alternatives to the public schools that, for whatever reasons, weren't working out for them.

Since then, our enrollment has nearly doubled, from 170 students to 320. We have 100 on a waiting list, simply because we lack the capacity to accommodate them. If we fail to provide a right and just education, these families would seek to go elsewhere.

The new Family Empowerment Scholarship created this year by the Legislature and Gov. Ron DeSantis is aimed at providing more opportunities across the state for students like ours at The Basilica – those who for financial reasons don't have the same choices in education as the better-off ones do.

The recent column I read expressed a concern that this new scholarship program, which is funded with tax dollars, is posing a threat to public schools by creating an unholy marriage between church and state. The fear is that money will be diverted away from the traditional public-school system toward funding choice schools. Actually, the money properly focuses on the student, not the institution. Public schools wouldn't get paid to educate students they don't have, and The Basilica School would only receive scholarship students if they choose to enroll.

The evidence indicates that the money has been well invested. State data shows FTC students, who are among the most economically disadvantaged and lowest-performing students when they leave public schools, have achieved the same test score gains in reading and math as students of all income levels nationally. Furthermore, a recent study by the Urban Institute found students using the scholarship are up to 43 percent more likely to enroll in four-year colleges than students in public schools, and up to 20 percent more likely to earn bachelor's degrees.

The Basilica School, like all of the other schools in Monroe County, strives daily to provide for the academic needs of its students. We face the same challenge the district does – recruiting enough qualified teachers to live in an area where affordable housing is scarce. I too want to see teachers compensated fairly. I'll be the first to say we can do better. But Florida families exercising choice in their child's education is not the obstacle to achieving that. That freedom is a core American value worth celebrating.

*Robert Wright is principal of The Basilica School of Saint Mary Star of the Sea in Key West.*

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