Options benefit Florida students

It’s a supreme irony that people who bash Florida public education the most often claim to be its biggest supporters. It’s a sad truth that people who bash “school choice” the most often mangle basic facts.

Add Herald-Tribune columnist Carrie Seidman to the list. In her Sunday column, “Battle over school choice destined to escalate,” Seidman bemoaned the expansion of educational options in Florida and claimed charter schools and state private school scholarships have “damaged the efficacy and functionality of the traditional free school model.”

Along the way, she made a series of blatant fact errors, including conflating charter schools and private schools with an uninformed claim that many private schools participating in Florida’s tax credit scholarship program are “run by for-profit charters.”

Florida’s public education system is performing better than ever, according to the most common indicators of academic achievement. Last fall, Florida ranked No. 4 among states in K-12 achievement in the annual rankings by Education Week, the nation’s respected publication of record for education news.

Edweek uses a thoughtful formula that includes graduation rates; results on college-caliber Advanced Placement exams; and test scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

Florida’s No. 4 ranking is only a surprise to those stuck in the ’90s, when Florida really was Flori-dah and barely half its students graduated from high school. In the past decade, Florida has finished No. 7, No. 7, No. 6, No. 12, No. 12, No. 7, No. 11, No. 11 and now No. 4, according to Edweek. Not a bad run.

The state’s progress is even more noteworthy considering its demographic challenges. Florida now ranks No. 4 in the percentage of graduating seniors who’ve passed Advanced Placement exams. This, even though it has among the highest percentage of low-income students in the nation, with roughly 60 percent eligible for free- and reduced-price lunch.

Seidman seems to base education quality on a single factor: funding. It’s true Florida per-pupil spending is among the lowest in America. Plenty of folks would like to see more, including many who value “school choice.” But the correlation between education spending and quality is far weaker than decades of spin have conditioned people to believe.

New York is No. 1 in spending, at $20,744 per pupil. On the four core NAEP tests, adjusted for demographics, it ranks No. 8, 11, 18 and 30. Alaska is No. 2 in spending, at $20,101 per pupil. On the adjusted NAEP, it comes in at No. 43, 46, 49 and 49.

Florida is No. 40 in spending, at $9,113 per pupil. But it’s No. 1, 1, 3 and 8 on that adjusted NAEP.

Public education is complicated. It’s impossible to say for sure which factors spurred Florida’s gains. But given the rising trend lines, it’s flat-out absurd to suggest “school choice” has hurt district schools.

Seidman boldly claims there’s “no proof that student success overall has improved due to the plethora of private options,” then weakly links to a story about a single low-performing school. The truth is, there’s a growing stack of evidence that choice options, like Florida schools as a whole, are getting better outcomes, and that public schools have improved due to competitive effects.

The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship serves nearly 100,000 lower-income students in private schools, three-quarters of them non-white, their average family income $25,756 a year. A decade’s worth of testing data shows they’re typically the students who struggle the most in district schools.

Yet a 2017 study of Florida by the Urban Institute found that tax credit scholarship recipients are more likely than their district peers to go to college and earn degrees; in fact, they are 29 percent more likely to earn associate degrees if they use the scholarship at least four years.

This, for roughly 55 percent of the per-pupil cost to educate the same student in a district school, according to the most recent comparison of spending across sectors.

Seidman clearly doesn’t know or recognize the difference between charter schools and private schools that accept tax credit scholarships.

The vast majority of those private schools are tiny, independent nonprofits. None of them are run by charter schools, which are tuition-free (so the students enrolled in them don’t need scholarships) and a completely separate sector of choice. Seidman is right about one thing: Florida continues to expand options. But given the evidence to date, that’s a plus. For everyone.

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