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In defense of Florida's public schools—and school choice

By Ron Matus



Despite overwhelming evidence that Florida's public schools have never been better, some still see phantoms: Terrible schools, made worse by school choice. In his March 19 column, Joe Henderson pitches an echo-chamber conspiracy theory. Lawmakers cripple public

schools by draining money from them. Then they ring alarms about how bad the schools are. Then they offer more choice to the students and parents who want out. The plot keeps spiraling to its intended conclusion: The “panacea” of privatization.

With all due respect to Mr. Henderson, who I agree with on some things, the facts don't support this narrative.

True, Florida has been a national leader in expanding choice for the past two decades. But over that span, Florida public schools have racked up accolades like FSU football used to notch Top 4 finishes.

Once adjusted for demographics, Florida ranks No. 1, No. 1, No. 3 and No. 8 on the four core tests for the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Florida ranks No. 3 in the percentage of graduating seniors who've passed college-caliber Advanced Placement exams. Florida ranks No. 4 in K-12 achievement, according to Education Week. Florida's graduation rate, 86.1 percent, is also up a fair bit from the '90s, when it barely topped 50 percent. These trend lines are rising even though Florida has among the highest rates of low-income students.

I agree that Florida should do better with funding. If I was king, I'd reward our educators because they're getting such good results. But the correlation between spending and outcomes isn't as strong as many people believe. And it's downright Twilight Zone to suggest private school scholarships are part of the “budgetary bleeding of public

schools.”

The amount of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship is about 60 percent of full per-pupil spending in district schools. That's why multiple studies conclude the program saves taxpayer money that can be reinvested in public schools, and not a single study shows otherwise. The real fiscal nightmare would occur if the program ended and 100,000 low-income students flooded into public schools. Construction costs alone would be in the billions.

Truth be told, Floridians have backed state support for private education for years. We've spent billions on Bright Futures scholarship at private colleges, on Voluntary pre-Kindergarten at private preschools, on McKay and Gardiner Scholarships for students with disabilities to attend private K-12 schools. There's been little to no controversy. What is it about expanding options for low-income kids, predominantly kids of color, that conjures the bogeyman of privatization, when none of these other programs did?

True, one of the new voucher proposals would expand eligibility into the middle class. But it ensures low-income parents have first dibs on the scholarships, and it's hard to envision masses of middle-class parents clamoring for them. Over generations, they've shaped public education to fit their needs, to a system based on buying homes in neighborhoods where the schools work well for their kids.

So many choice critics exercised that form of choice, yet would deny options to those who can't afford to do likewise. They're haunted by myths. That our public schools aren't good. That expanding choice will make them worse. Here's hoping the facts eventually exorcise them.

Ron Matus is director of policy and public affairs for Step Up For Students, a nonprofit that administers four state-supported scholarship programs. He is a former state education reporter for the Tampa Bay Times.