Free public schools won’t ever work for all children

Re: “Family Empowerment Scholarships: We’d pay for their choice,” March 15

Imagine grocery shopping with your friend. She lives near a safe and convenient store with a wide variety of options that meet the nutritional needs of your family.

Now imagine that you can only shop in your neighborhood.

The store near you doesn’t have what you need, but that’s too bad. The only way you can shop with your friend is to move into her neighborhood.

This, in a nutshell, is the system championed by Sally Butzin. In her recent op-ed, she called it free, universal public education (created in the late 1830s!), even though it has never been free or universal. It’s a system that works quite well for those who can pay for it, which is precisely why they mourn its passing.

Welcome to 2019.

Florida Parent Network champions students over systems. Thousands of our parents have seen their children’s lives transformed thanks to scholarships, charters, magnets and vouchers. Others have found success in virtual or homeschools.

These options have been around since the 1830s, but they’re helping more of today’s children, and growing in popularity each year. We help parents defend and fight for these options.

Butzin doesn’t really get it. The world she is describing, where taxes “fund a free public system for all,” is a fantasy world.

For eight years, I taught in district schools and my sons attended their neighborhood high school. Public education isn’t free. We paid a premium in rent and mortgage payments. And those who couldn’t were out of luck.

That doesn’t sound universal to me.

The op-ed is full of offensive tropes, like blaming choice (read: low-income, mostly minority parents who choose something other than their district school) for segregation. Has she been to Leon County schools lately?

Let’s not blame minority moms for that one.

When she compares low-income parents choosing private schools with low-income parents abandoning their children or selling them for drugs — suggesting the state has a right to protect all their babies from “bad parent choices” — she disparages an entire population. Many of whom I doubt she even knows.

Moms who sit up with their children every night, children crying and scared because they don’t feel safe in school. Parents who often work multiple jobs to afford tutors after being told their children can’t learn like other kids. Parents researching schools that offer glimmers of hope. Parents who sacrifice and cut back to supplement scholarships and vouchers, putting their children’s needs ahead of their own.

Butzin is wrong. Money should not be spent on schools; it must be spent on children. Children who have parents. Parents who love them. Parents who have every right to make the same decisions Butzin was allowed to make for her own children.

What else has been around since the 1830s? Educational choice, for those who can afford it.

These days, we’re aiming to open that up for everyone.

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