

FLAPOL

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School Choice scholarships serve Florida's most vulnerable children This isn't about privatization. This is about saving lives.

By Bishop C.E. Glover



A few weeks ago, the highly respected Urban Institute released the findings of a groundbreaking new study that should be of interest to all of us who care about public education in Florida. It found that the low-income, mostly minority students who use the Florida Tax Credit

Scholarship are up to 43 percent more like to attend four-year colleges than their peers who attend public schools, and up to 20 percent more likely to earn bachelor's degrees. The outcomes are even stronger for students who use the scholarship four or more years.

This is good news — and no surprise to those of us familiar with the effectiveness of the scholarship, which now serves 100,000 students. But it is another inconvenient truth for opponents, including Sen. Perry Thurston, whose recent essay disparaging choice scholarships circulated in newspapers statewide.

As a pastor with a scholarship school in Sen. Thurston's district, I know why this scholarship is so desperately needed, and why it has a waiting list of 13,000 students. It is responding to massive demand from low-income parents, most of them black and Hispanic. And it is putting thousands upon thousands of additional students on the path to a better life.

That combination of demand and success is why Gov. Ron DeSantis recently proposed a new scholarship to end the waitlist. That's why black and Hispanic parents and pastors stood side by side with him when he made the announcement in Orlando and Miami.

This isn't about politics or privatization. This is about saving lives.

We founded Mount Bethel Christian Academy in Fort Lauderdale 30 years ago to save lives. We saw so many children failing in their neighborhood schools. We wanted

to offer a nurturing alternative. Thanks to the scholarship, we're now serving even more of those students — this year, 122 of them.

The demand continues to grow because parents know we are delivering high-quality education. And we know if we don't, our savvy parents will take the scholarship to a school that does. This is the kind of accountability that many of our public schools never face.

Contrary to myth, Mount Bethel Christian Academy and the other private schools participating in scholarship programs aren't cherry picking scholarship students. Two-thirds are Black or Hispanic. Their average family income is \$25,000 a year. And their test scores make clear they were the students who struggled the most in their public schools.

But now we have rigorous confirmation from the Urban Institute that with help from a scholarship, and help from a different learning environment, their academic trend lines are rising. That these students are finally achieving to their God-given potential is a boost to not only them and their families, but our state.

Also contrary to myth, the scholarship does not come at the expense of public schools. Critics repeat that line, but the truth is this: The value of a scholarship is barely half what taxpayers would spend to educate the same student in a public school. And there's ample evidence from test scores and graduation rates that our public schools have never performed better.

For far too many of our students, better than ever still isn't good enough. That's where the scholarship comes in. All schools, public and private, have a vital role to play in lifting our students out of poverty. The more hands on deck, the better.

Bishop C.E. Glover is the senior pastor and CEO of Mount Bethel Ministries and co-founder of Mount Bethel Christian Academy.