

Miami Herald

April 10, 2020

Florida is empowering parents to drive quality in public education

By Ana Maria Rodriguez



Florida representative says that school-choice scholarships are yielding good academic results. ARIEL SKELLEY GETTY

Last year, researchers at the Urban Institute reported promising news about the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, the biggest private school choice program in America.

The low-income students on scholarship were usually the ones who struggled the most in their prior public schools. The research showed that students who joined the scholarship program were up to 43 percent more likely than their district school peers to enroll in four-year colleges, and up to 20 percent more likely to earn bachelor's degrees. Those on scholarship four or more years were up to 45 percent more likely to earn bachelor's degrees.

I highlight these findings in response to persistent falsehoods about the academic outcomes for students using Florida choice scholarships, and about the accountability mechanisms that lead to them. Rep. Javier Fernandez's recent op-ed in the Miami Herald is a case in point.

I appreciate his passion for public education, which I share. But the facts refute his claims.

Choice scholarships are yielding better educational outcomes for the most disadvantaged students in Florida.

Eleven years of annual educational outcome data analyses, required by state law, show Florida Tax Credit Scholarship students are, on average, making a year's worth of academic progress in a year's worth of time. Given that these students by and large came into their new schools far behind, this is encouraging.

But Fernandez distorted these findings. He described a "disturbing downward trend." He said that 54 percent of

Miami-Dade private schools with scholarship students "showed no academic gains," when the actual figure is 9 percent.

What he gets most wrong is the accountability piece. Too many of us have been subject to one system of education accountability for so long we can't wrap our heads around a better way. Accountability isn't imposed by regulations alone. In public education, empowering parents to make decisions about their child's education is a major accountability mechanism.

In Florida, during the past 30 years, we've been giving more parents more power. They have more freedom than ever to look beyond schools assigned by Zip code and to find learning options that are truly best for their children. The results show that this is not only good for their children, but good for the public school system.

Every independent fiscal analysis of the tax-credit scholarship shows it saves taxpayer money that can be reinvested in public schools. According to the most recent comparison from Florida TaxWatch, the scholarship is worth 59 percent of per-pupil spending in district schools. The new Family Empowerment Scholarship is valued at roughly the same amount, so this notion that choice scholarships hurt district schools doesn't stand up to scrutiny.

Fernandez also said that there are 79 private schools with Florida Tax Credit students in Miami-Dade. There are 423. That's not an insignificant number, and it brings to me to my last point. Expanding private-school choice has a positive impact on public schools.

Public schools clearly benefit from the competitive effects, too. We see this in Miami-Dade every day. Under the dynamic leadership of Superintendent Alberto Carvalho, the school district re-invented itself as options like those 423 private schools became accessible to more parents. It didn't shy away from the competition. It expanded its own compelling choice offerings. The result is one of the most innovative and high-performing school districts in America, in one of the boldest states for educational choice in America.

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