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A middle ground on vouchers

By Jon East

A decade after vouchers were introduced to Florida as an alternative to public schools judged as failing, the political debate is beginning to mature. Some of us who believe that public education is a sacred trust can now see that not every private option is an attack. In some cases, and scholarships for low-income children is surely one, the intent is merely to give disadvantaged students another tool to succeed.

Is it possible, nearly 10 years down the road, to find common ground?

Emotions are still raw with many fine educators. Some recent reforms have treated public school teachers like scapegoats, labeling their schools failures. But what if our collective struggle to reach poor and disadvantaged students could lead us down a middle path?

First, we accept the gravity of the challenge: less than half of all African-American students graduate from high school, and less than half of the state's 1.2-million low-income students score at grade level on standardized reading tests. Then we try to match each student to the learning environment that best fits his or her needs.

One current option in that mix is the Corporate Tax Credit Scholarships program, funded by companies that receive a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for their donations to state approved non-profit groups. Those groups, in turn,

hand out tuition scholarships worth no more than \$3,950.

Last year, the average income for a household of four on the program was \$24,489. Remarkably, the families also paid out of pocket an average of about \$1,000 per child to participate. The program is limited to 25,000 students — or roughly one in every 50 of the state's low-income students.

The 900 private schools that participate don't have all the answers. But they offer different learning environments that may match the learning styles for different students. Step in to the Yvonne C. Reed Christian School in St. Petersburg, for example, and find a small, tightly knit group of mostly African-American students with a principal who hugs and laughs and knows every child by name. The school uses a reading curriculum that the founder and principal, a 34-year veteran of public schools, contends is better suited for her students. One month into the school year, kindergartners are combining consonants and vowels with obvious pride, and Reed-Clayton says, convincingly, "Come back in January and they'll be reading."

The point is that, in an education world increasingly focused on individual learning needs, "private" doesn't have to be the adversary of "public." And "uniformity," a constitutional term that education lawyers argue about, can't possibly mean there should be just one way to teach. Look around.

Charter schools are private by

every standard measure. School districts contract with private agencies for alternative or after-school programs and with private schools to serve children with special needs. Within most districts, students also have an array of options — arts and science and math magnets, fundamental schools, career academies, gifted programs, community college classes, online courses. All are aimed of fitting the needs of each student.

I left a job writing about education to work for the group that oversees the corporate scholarship program, and some of my friends in public education think I've lost my mind. They argue that it robs money from public schools, though the state treasury saves about \$3,000 for each student enrolled in the program. They say the required standardized tests are not enough to hold private schools accountable, while almost spitefully insisting on a standard, the FCAT, they otherwise eschew.

To me, the old fight over private school choice is a distraction to our collective effort to lift up children in poverty. This year a third of all Democrats and a majority of the Black Caucus voted to expand the program. They agree that poor kids aren't public or private. They are simply in need, and they deserve all of our best efforts.

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