

TAX CREDIT SCHOLARSHIPS

Program gives students options

By Doug Tuthill

The numbers are hard to refute. Florida taxpayers saved \$38.9 million last year while also providing different learning options to 21,493 children from poor and working-class families. But that finding, issued Tuesday by the respected state Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability, should not be interpreted as a competitive threat to traditional public schools.

What the savings actually mean is that one vital option for low-income students is not financially compromising any of the other opportunities available to 2.6 million public school students. That's good news for all educators and taxpayers.

The Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship program, now in its seventh year, was created to help students who are at the greatest risk of failing. Children who come from impoverished homes face enormous obstacles, and we owe them our best collective efforts.

This year, about one of every 52 children on free and reduced lunch is using the scholarship to attend a private school that may better suit his or her needs. Remarkably, their

families, with average incomes of \$24,543 per year, are so motivated they often end up paying the difference between the \$3,950 scholarship and the actual school tuition out of their own pockets (about \$1,200 per year on average).

This kind of customized learning is an integral part of today's public education system. Students choose from magnet and fundamental schools, career academies and International Baccalaureate programs. They take advanced placement or online courses or dual enrollment on college campuses. Last year, 105,239 students attended privately run charter schools, 19,582 students with disabilities chose private providers, and 136,436 four-year-olds went mostly to private schools for prekindergarten — options that didn't exist a generation ago.

In Florida today, one in four students attends something other than what their parents would call a traditional public school.

When lawmakers expanded the Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship program last May by a strong bipartisan majority, they asked OP-PAGA to answer a narrow financial question: Do the scholarships undermine the operational budget for

traditional public schools?

The report issued Tuesday said no, and went further. The state, OP-PAGA wrote, actually saves \$1.49 for each \$1 that is lost in corporate tax income.

That finding should prove reassuring to public school advocates, but appears to have created unnecessary angst instead. A Florida Education Association spokesman said: "It seems like there's a lot of scenarios and a lot of assumptions and not a lot of facts." *Herald-Tribune* columnist Tom Lyons went so far as to call the scholarship program "a money-laundering scheme."

That's unfortunate. These scholarships are part of a publicly funded system that is customizing education and finding ways to match different children to the learning environments that suit them best. They strengthen public education and save tax money. Surely that can't be a bad thing.

Doug Tuthill, a former teachers' union president, is president of the Florida School Choice Fund. The fund oversees the scholarship funding organizations that run the Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship program.