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What they think

Corporate scholarships help kids at greatest risk

Doug Tuthill

The state Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability needs no help defending the integrity of its research -- least of all against a Colorado academic who alleges the agency "concocts its numbers out of thin air." ("Legislature's vouchers report is based on smoke and mirrors," *Orlando Sentinel*, Dec. 24.)

But the argument that scholarships for poor children are a money loser because low-income families or Catholic schools could pick up the tab themselves is itself starved of oxygen.

University of Colorado associate professor Kevin Welner may well believe the agency erred in its finding that the Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship program for low-income students saved taxpayers $38.9 million last year. But his attack is most peculiar.

Welner acknowledges that the average scholarship amounts to only 56 percent of the direct state cost-per-student in public schools, a number that disregards the cost of constructing classrooms.

But he says the savings disappear because at least half these students would have gone to private schools anyway.

In making such a claim, Welner breezes past the fact that the average household income of scholarship families was $24,543 and the average tuition is $5,000. He says that if families can't afford the tuition, the Catholic church can. "The reality," he writes, "is that Catholic schools in urban areas sometimes enroll 60 to 70 percent low-income children."

Welner's "reality" would have been enhanced by some basic research. A White House report issued in September states that more than 1,200 Catholic schools have closed since 1990. In Florida, the other "reality" is that only one in 10 private schools is Catholic, and they too are under enormous pressure.

Welner spares no criticism when it comes to corporate scholarships. He wrote a book labeling them as "neovouchers," and condemned the program in other states as "an obfuscation of public expenditures" and has written that the scholarships are "used by wealthier families with children who already attend private school."

He even argues that they "move policy away from democratic control over education and from a societal commitment to public schooling."

None of those strident assessments applies to Florida, where a strong bipartisan majority of lawmakers expanded the scholarship program in May.

The corporate scholarships here were created in 2001 specifically for children who live in poor and working-class families, and whose income meets the federal guidelines for free and reduced lunch.

These are the children at greatest risk in public education, and they tend to have the fewest options.

In Florida, where at least one in every four students opts for a less traditional and more customized approach to learning, corporate scholarships are a way to strengthen public education and increase equality of opportunity.

They serve as another tool, alongside such options as the Florida Virtual School, charter schools, dual enrollment and magnet schools, that allow students to match their individual needs with the learning environment that suits them best.

Whether they save tax money is secondary to their mission. But the OPPAGA report is the third independent study to find that the scholarships do save taxpayers money. And its findings should not be interpreted as a competitive threat to traditional public schools.

What the report shows is that one vital option for low-income children does not come at the expense of the options available to all 2.6 million public school students.

That's good news for Florida taxpayers and for all schoolchildren.

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