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Scholarship Strengthens Poor Students

By Doug Tuthill

Within the education policies that have come to be viewed as the legacy of Jeb Bush is a strategic imperative that transcends any one governor or political party. It is the light that now shines on students from impoverished homes and our collective obligation to do better by them.

In that sense, Bush's A+ Plan in 1999 was the successor to Lawton Chiles' Blueprint 2000 in 1991. Both Bush, a Republican, and Chiles, a Democrat, were committed to using standards, assessments and accountability to improve student learning - especially the achievement of students from low-income families. One result is that Florida is making great progress in closing the achievement gap, including with Hispanic students who now outperform all students in 15 different states.

But the numbers also reveal the challenge. They tell us that only 48 percent of students from low-income families in Florida scored at grade-level last year on standardized reading tests - a full 24 percentage points lower than their more affluent counterparts.

As *Ledger* capital correspondent Joe Follick reported Jan. 11 ["School Changes Under Pressure," front page], the continued push to improve Florida education tends to get caught up in partisan battles, school-grading methodology and budgetary showdowns.

But the bipartisan commitment to improving the achievement of low-income students is why the Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship for low-

income students was expanded last year with strong support from both Democrats and Republicans. That scholarship provides a learning option for children who are at greatest risk.

Public education in this new century has begun a remarkable transformation from factory mode to cafeteria style, and families are responding. In Florida, 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 used taxpayer funds to choose private schools and 136,346 4-year-olds used vouchers to go to mostly private schools for prekindergarten - options that didn't exist a generation ago.

According to the state Department of Education, one in four students today attends something other than what their parents would call a traditional public school.

These options recognize a simple education fact of life: Different children learn in different ways. That's also the principle that guides the Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship, now in its seventh year and serving more than 23,000 low-income children in Florida.

Under the program, companies receive a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for money they contribute to state-approved nonprofit organizations. Those organizations, in turn, award tuition scholarships of up to \$3,950

to children whose families qualify for the federal free-and-reduced lunch program. Remarkably, these families, with average household incomes of \$24,543, are so motivated they often end up paying the difference between the scholarship and the actual tuition out of their own pockets (about \$1,200).

The roughly 950 private schools that participate in the program, including 27 in Polk County, don't have all the answers. But they do offer different learning environments that may match the learning needs of different children.

You won't find a football team (yet) at Northridge Christian Academy in Haines City, for example, but you will experience a self-paced curriculum, small classes, nurturing teachers and an affable principal who believes in a family atmosphere. You'll also find 63 disadvantaged students, otherwise indistinguishable from the rest, who are there by virtue of a corporate scholarship.

Both Chiles and Bush played a role in an education system today that is increasingly defined by empowered parents choosing from customized learning options created by education entrepreneurs.

In that arena, scholarships for low-income children strengthen public education and help fulfill a promise that is politically bipartisan.

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.