

Published Wednesday, May 13, 2009

Lawmakers use choice to help poor children



By Doug Tuthill

Re: "Scholarship tax-break program should be vetoed" (My View, May 8)

We're all concerned about the financial duress our public schools are feeling, but that doesn't mean an important lifeline for poor students must therefore be discarded.

Kent S. Miller, a distinguished professor emeritus from Florida State University, draws that untenable conclusion in a recent column in which he labels the state scholarship program serving 23,400 low-income children "an outrage." His question to readers: "How can we justify diverting another \$118 million from a badly bleeding public education system?"

The correct answer is that we don't. The Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship program does not divert tax money from public school children. Rather it takes taxes that would otherwise go to the state treasury and directs them to students who suffer the greatest odds in modern education. It creates a learning option that economically disadvantaged children would not otherwise have, one that a University of Florida report concluded last year is attracting some of the state's poorest and lowest-performing students. Three-fifths of them come from single-parent households, two-thirds are black or Hispanic, and the average household income for four is \$25,000.

These children use the scholarships to attend roughly 1,000 private schools around the state, but that doesn't make their choice an affront to public education. In Florida, students choose from all types of customized

options — magnet and fundamental schools, career academies and International Baccalaureate programs, 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 prekindergarten schools.

These options recognize a fact of life: Different children learn in different ways. Far from undermining public education, these programs expand and strengthen it.

The money spent on Tax Credit scholarships does deserve scrutiny, and three credible independent reports have all concluded the program saves tax money. Qualifying students receive a maximum scholarship of \$3,950. The Legislature's per-student state allocation for public schools next year is \$6,783. That's 71 percent higher. Those who would then suggest the savings disappear if 40 percent of the students can pay their own tuition or find charity are showing an almost willful disregard for their desperate financial plight. These scholarship students are not draining away tax dollars.

The question of academic accountability is also worth examining. Miller is right that most scholarship students don't take the FCAT, but that doesn't mean they aren't tested. All students are required to take a nationally norm-referenced test approved by the state Department of Education, and most of them take the prestigious Stanford Achievement Test. Their

scores are reported to a research team hired by DOE, and the first report on learning progress is due later this month. One advantage of the Stanford over the FCAT is that it gives families, schools and DOE a chance to compare scholarship students with students nationally.

The Legislature this session did decide to let insurance companies share in the tax credit for this program, but Miller may have missed the extent to which lawmakers are coalescing around this effort to help poor children. A program created eight years ago with the vote of only one Democrat was supported this year by a combined House-Senate vote of 123-34, including nearly half the Democrats, a majority of the Black Caucus and all of the Hispanic Caucus.

Said Rep. Darryl Rouson, a black Democrat from St. Petersburg: "In these days of technology and access and educational advancements, we need to give families choice. And young children, whether they're black or Hispanic or Asian, ought to have access to the same kind of private privileged education that some of our other children have just because of who their parents are."

This program is no magic bullet, but neither is it "an outrage." Our goal is to help level the playing field for our neediest children, which is a fundamental promise of public education.

Doug Tuthill is president of the Florida School Choice Fund, a nonprofit organization that supports scholarships for low-income students and education options for all students. Contact him at dtuthill@stepupforstudents.com.