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Vouchers providing options to the needy

Teachers' union representatives and others are chortling over the first academic assessment of Florida's voucher program. Students receiving the Florida Corporate Tax Credit Scholarships so they can attend private school are doing no better than similar students in public schools.

But those quick to dismiss the voucher effort should take a closer look at the report, which shows the vouchers are doing exactly what they were intended to do: give poor, troubled students education options.

What's wrong with that?

It's too early to accurately gauge the students' academic progress, as the University of Florida economics professor who oversaw the report emphasized. It measured only first-year test gains. Researcher David Figlio was handicapped by incomplete data for a baseline.

But the study suggests voucher students are holding their own.

When compared to state and national public school test scores, the voucher students' scores are on par with similar students.

More tellingly, the report indicates the voucher program is attracting students who are among the

poorest and most academically challenged in the public school system. Those who take the vouchers tend to come from low-performing schools.

This undermines critics' claims that vouchers would attract promising students, who would likely succeed in public schools. The vouchers appear to be serving students who most need alternatives.

The Tax Credit Scholarships offer tax credits to businesses that contribute to a scholarship fund, which provides vouchers. Only student who qualify for the federal lunch program are eligible.

This past school year, 23,400 students participated. Two-thirds are minorities, and most are from single-parent homes.

The program is a good deal for taxpayers.

Attending public school costs more. When local, state and federal costs, plus capital costs, are factored in, the average cost per student in public school is \$12,000.

In the voucher program, the maximum scholarship is \$3,950, about 57 percent of the roughly \$7,000 the state pays per public school student.

And a scholarship parent pays on

average \$1,000 a year for their child to attend the private school. The program requires the parents and child to be motivated.

By taking challenging students from poor-performing schools, the Tax Credit Scholarships are easing the burden on the public school system, not diverting resources.

Vouchers are not working miracles, of course. And some early champions, to be sure, had goofy expectations.

Ideologues in the Legislature acted as if private schools could do no wrong. While demanding strict accountability of public schools, they gave little oversight to private schools receiving vouchers.

This resulted in a number of embarrassing news reports. But the state adopted the needed reforms, which included the just-completed academic report card.

Participants do look to be staying in school and making progress. More studies will clarify vouchers' impact.

But Floridians should be encouraged the state at least offers impoverished students a chance to discover the academic path that works best for them.