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Tax credit scholarships help the poor to succeed

BY JOHN KIRTLEY

Special to the Times

The first evaluation of standardized test scores for the Florida tax credit scholarship may be shedding more light on the lingering political divide on parental choice than on the 23,400 low-income schoolchildren who take part. Well-meaning people on each side have been so eager to cast the results through their own prism of “public” vs. “private” that we tend to miss the extent to which this distinction has lost relevance.

Today's public education system is a cafeteria with nearly limitless entrees, and no single one is categorically better or worse than the other. They are aimed at different children with different needs. The International Baccalaureate program at St. Petersburg High has launched many students to Ivy League universities, but also leaves some of them behind. The Culinary Academy at Tarpon Springs High is igniting the imagination of many students and irrelevant to others. Some students thrive in magnet programs or fundamental schools; others excel online with virtual education.

In this expanding universe of options, the tax credit scholarship is aimed solely at low-income children. The evaluation report by the University of Florida shows that even among their peers on free and reduced lunch in public schools — of whom fewer than half read at grade level — these children are poorer, and they were

among the lowest performers in their assigned public schools.

These are the very children for whom public education promises equal opportunity, and the scholarships are part of that commitment. These children are not siphoning off resources from the public system. They are in fact an integral part of public education, in its modern form — just like privately run charter schools, private prekindergarten providers, private schools serving disabled students with McKay Scholarships, and community colleges that teach high schoolers.

The test scores for tax credit scholarship students are an important part of evaluating the program and, much like the scores in traditional schools, are best judged over time. The UF report showed that the first-year learning gains for the scholarship kids were roughly the same as for students on free and reduced lunch in public schools, but warned that higher family incomes for the public school group could skew the results. The national comparison was cleaner, and found the scholarship students kept pace with all test-takers regardless of income. It takes more than one year to see the benefits of any educational transition, but for these kids to even keep pace with students who have higher family incomes is encouraging.

We see other heartening indicators. We all know engaged parents improve achievement, so how's this for engagement: Our scholarship par-

ents pay on average \$1,000 out of pocket to make up the difference between the tuition and the maximum \$3,950 scholarship. This is remarkable given that their average income is \$25,400 for a family of four. Two-thirds of the students are black or Hispanic, and three-fifths of them are from single-parent households.

We hear moms tell us their children no longer fake illness to avoid school, that their children don't get into fights anymore, and that they are doing homework and setting goals for the first time. We see promising schools such as Miami Union Academy, which has achieved a graduation rate of 96 percent and college placement of 90 percent with largely poor Haitian students. Or Yvonne Reed Christian School in St. Petersburg, run by a 34-year public school veteran who started her own school because she was determined to make sure young black males could read.

All schools need to be held accountable for learning, but I hope we can find enough common ground to accept that this option for these terribly disadvantaged children strengthens public education. These children are part of this expansive new world of public education, and they deserve every tool we can hand them.

John Kirtley is chairman of Step Up For Students, the nonprofit that helps administer the state's corporate tax scholarship program.