

NEWS-HERALD EDITORIAL

Step in right direction

It's not exactly dogs and cats living together, but when a Florida school district and a teachers union embrace a voucher program to benefit private schools, you begin wondering what the next sign of the apocalypse could be.

The Hillsborough County public schools and the local teachers union announced this week that they will participate in Florida's Step Up for Students tax credit voucher program to help train private school teachers. The program will spend at least \$100,000 on classes for teachers who serve its scholarship students, who are among Hillsborough's most economically disadvantaged. According to the *St. Petersburg Times*, the school district and union will provide space in the jointly developed Center for Technology and Education.

Step Up for Students allows poverty-level students (about 23,400 last year) to attend private schools using vouchers worth \$3,950 that are financed with corporate income tax credits. Corporations receive a 100-percent credit on the portion of their

state income tax that they donate to nonprofit alternative education programs.

In 2008, Florida's Office of Program Policy Analysis and Governmental Accountability, the Legislature's watchdog agency, found that the voucher program saved taxpayers \$38.9 million because the state spends less on vouchers than the average cost of a public school student. Other independent studies have confirmed that conclusion.

Nevertheless, the public school industry usually has treated vouchers as if they were infected with the swine flu virus — something that saps the life out of taxpayer-funded schools.

So it's refreshing to see a different attitude emerge in the Tampa area.

"Bottom line is these are our children, they are disadvantaged children, and they often return to our public schools," Jean Clements, president of the Hillsborough Classroom Teachers' Association, told the *Times*. "I want them to get the best possible education, wherever they

get it."

Hillsborough Superintendent MaryEllen Elia told the *Times* that the district feels a responsibility for every student in the county, whether they're in a private school or a public one. "Ultimately, we all want to help teachers get better, wherever they're teaching our kids," she said.

Amen to both of them.

Education dollars belong to the students and their families, not educrats, to decide how they should be best spent. Who cares if a student learns in this building or that building, under this teacher or that teacher? What matters is what works. Expanding education opportunities and giving families the ability to find the best schooling situation for their children should be the bottom line.

Hillsborough officials should be applauded for removing one of the barriers that can prevent students from getting the help they need — a focus on protecting turf instead of aiding the child. It's an example that should be followed by the rest of the state.