Vouchers give kids a chance

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Amid its expanding array of public-education learning options, Florida offers only one that focuses exclusively on children of poverty. And predictably this is the one learning option that politicians demagogue when searching for votes.

Consider the facts: Last year the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship served 24,871 low-income K-12 students in 1,002 private schools at a third the per-student cost of traditional public schools.

The students who choose this option have an average household income that is barely 20 percent above poverty. Three-fifths of them live with only one parent, three-fourths of them are children of color and a state-commissioned researcher determined that they are the lowest performing students in the public schools they leave behind.

Yet these same students, according to the first-year evaluation of standardized tests, are making the same academic gains as students at all income levels nationwide.

So why, as Miami Herald political writer and columnist Beth Reinhard reported recently, do some Democrats oppose giving low-income children this choice?

Some have told me that they don’t think low-income parents are capable of making good decisions for their children, but for most others the opposition comes from their misunderstanding of what constitutes public education today. Over the past 30 years, public education has begun moving away from a one-size-fits-all factory model to a customization model that recognizes our children’s diverse learning needs.

Students today choose from a broad continuum of learning options, including magnet and fundamental schools, career academies and International Baccalaureate programs, advanced placement, online courses or dual enrollment on college campuses. When students withdraw from their zoned school to attend a choice program and public funding goes with them, then this funding system is called a “voucher.” Every state legislator and school-board member who supports the public funding of school choice supports vouchers.

School choices such as career academies, International Baccalaureate and online learning are all founded on public-private partnerships. The International Baccalaureate is a privately owned program that school districts license. These public-private partnerships expand and strengthen public education cost-effectively. They have also rendered the old public vs. private school debate moot.

That’s one reason a bill to improve the Tax Credit Scholarship was passed this year with a bipartisan majority that included 44 percent of all Democrats, a majority of the Black Caucus and the entire Hispanic Caucus.

And it’s the reason the Hillsborough school district and teachers’ union signed a partnership agreement with our scholarship organization in August to provide training to teachers in the private schools serving these children.

Public-private partnerships strengthen public education.

As union president Jean Clements described it: “This is not a competition. It’s about all of us doing our best to help children who come from very difficult circumstances.”

The children on the tax-credit scholarships do often suffer from their hardscrabble existence, but those of us who had the opportunity to get together in Fort Lauderdale recently to celebrate this program saw hundreds of students who are turning things around.

One of them, Antonio Trigo, a freshman at Miami Union Academy, brought the crowd to its feet as he described his journey from near-academic failure in his previous school to a scholarship school where he found his bearings and now measures two grade levels ahead of his colleagues on standardized tests. Trigo’s story also touched the heart of Rev. H.K. Matthews, the Florida civil-rights icon, who spoke at the event.

Matthews told the audience: “Our children shouldn’t have to fight an uphill battle just to learn what has been promised by our Constitution and our God.”

I’m a lifelong Democrat and a former president of two teachers unions, and I know all these emerging school-choice options, including tax-credit scholarships for underprivileged children, are good for our children and serve the public good.

Tax-credit scholarships are not the whole answer to our collective struggle to reach all schoolchildren from low socioeconomic backgrounds, but they are one important option that clearly works for some children.

Let’s not let politics stand in the way.

Doug Tuthill is president of Step Up For Students, a nonprofit scholarship funding organization that helps oversee the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program.