

THE ST. AUGUSTINE RECORD

SINCE 1894

Sunday, December 6, 2009

Tax credit scholarships are not handouts

By **KAREN STERN**

Waste Management recently sponsored an Environmental Day Camp at which a local student spoke, and she brought people to their feet. Her name is Denisha Merriweather, and she told us about the challenges she overcame moving from school to school until she landed at the Esprit de Corps Center for Learning, a private school in Jacksonville. She's now college bound, an achievement made possible with the help of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, which gives poor and at-risk students a chance at an education that best meets their needs.

Ellen Whitmer, in a recent guest column, insults the mission of the Tax Credit Scholarship by charging that schools like Esprit de Corps and 1,000 others throughout Florida are looking for a taxpayer handout in tough economic times. Whitmer, guided by an uninformed position on what constitutes public education today, would have students like Denisha suffer.

Fortunately, an increasingly bipartisan coalition of lawmakers sees things differently. Last spring, a majority of black legislators, half the Democrats and all of the Hispanic

caucus voted to strengthen the Tax Credit Scholarship, which is awarded only to students who qualify for a free and reduced price lunch. Their convictions have allowed corporations to award scholarships to 27,000 low-income students this year. Waste Management, for one, has donated \$3 million to provide more than 774 scholarships.

Families today enjoy an array of public education options, and more affluent parents have long enjoyed adding private alternatives to that mix. The Tax Credit Scholarship simply levels the playing field by extending those same options to families of limited means.

Whitmer gets some facts wrong and it's important to correct them here.

The Legislature voted to award tax credits to companies who want to redirect their insurance premium tax liability to a scholarship funding organization. It is the companies who pay the tax, not policyholders. Additionally, Whitmer calls on lawmakers to save money by cutting the tax credits, when the Legislature's own research arm concluded last year that for every \$1 in tax credits, the state saves \$1.49.

More disturbing is the distortion of what must be the most significant venture between a public school district and a private education group in recent months. Step Up For Students, the nonprofit group that administers the Tax Credit Scholarship, provided \$100,000 with the help of the Walton Family Foundation and others to a professional development initiative run by the Hillsborough County school district and the Hillsborough teachers union. The effort extends the professional training public school teachers receive to private educators. It does not, as Whitmer alleges, simply bring private school teachers "up to speed."

We, too, want to see public schools thrive. But different students learn in different ways, and we will not sit back and watch a 43 percent African-American graduation rate in Florida drop even further. Neither will Esprit de Corps. By her own admission, this school prevented Denisha from becoming yet another dropout. It isn't looking for a handout, just the support to send another student like Denisha on to college.

Karen Stern is also a former St. Johns County School Board member and chair, and a former St. Johns County commissioner and chair.