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Liberate education from one-size-fits-all

Bob McClure

My View

Whether Florida should pursue a constitutional amendment authorizing school vouchers is a reasonable question, but to suggest that virtually all forms of educational choice are a menace to public education, as the *Democrat* did in its Jan. 17 editorial ("Education ideals: If only wishing could pay the bills") is a simple distortion.

Surely, the debate can use more intellectual rigor than that.

Granted, the recommendation by the Florida Council of 100 and Florida Chamber of Commerce to pursue a constitutional amendment allowing vouchers is provocative. It is also true, as your editorial asserted, that funding additional private learning options remains controversial among many educators. Nonetheless, the newspaper's search for "meaningful solutions" would be helped by facing modern reality.

First, let's set the judicial record straight. The Florida Supreme Court in 2006 declared one voucher program, called Opportunity Scholarships and targeted at students who were assigned to public schools graded as failing, to be unconstitutional. It did not and has not ruled on any other private option — not McKay Scholarships for students with learning disabilities, not Tax Credit Scholarships for low-income children, not pre-kindergarten vouchers for 4-year-olds, not private charter schools for all types of students.

For that matter, it has not yet applied its stated definition of "uniformity" to virtual education or dual enrollment or career academies or any number of current education options that are intended to be different, each of which is not, to

borrow the court's constitutional phrase, a "uniform system."

The scale here is relevant as well. The Opportunity Scholarship program was serving 733 students at the time it was closed down. Today, McKay, Tax Credit, pre-K and charter schools serve more than 300,000.

The education world is changing, but it seems the *Democrat* is in a form of denial. The paper speaks of vouchers as "a holdover of the Bush administration" as though it refuses to accept that Floridians from all political spectrums, who once may have opposed these choice options, are increasingly pushing for private alternatives. In fact, the majority of the state's own Black Legislative Caucus supported scholarships for low-income students last year.

Your editorial also speaks of teacher tenure as a "political distraction," missing the extent to which finding new models of teacher compensation is now part of the national agenda being driven by the U.S. Department of Education's Race to the Top initiative.

Moreover, how can the *Democrat* not acknowledge that the nation's first African-American president campaigned on a promise to double the number of students in charter schools? If President Obama succeeds, one of every 10 Florida students will be enrolled in a privately operated and publicly subsidized school by 2014. Surely, the president is not intending to "undermine" public schools.

Most curious in the editorial is the attack on a program that now serves more than 27,000 of the state's poorest and most academically desperate children. Fewer than half of all low-income students read at grade level, and fewer than half of all black males graduate

from high school. The Tax Credit Scholarship program is aimed specifically at helping this group by offering another option. It is available only to students who qualify for free or reduced lunches.

The editorial claims that these scholarships don't "realistically assist poor kids," but a report issued by the state Department of Education last year finds quite the opposite. It reported that the Tax Credit Scholarships actually serve the poorest of the poor and attract the lowest-performing students from low-performing public schools. Perhaps more importantly, the report also determined that these students are making the same academic gains as students from all income levels nationwide. If the point is that the program serves only a small percentage of the 1.2 million public school students in Florida on free or reduced lunch, that is certainly the case. But that doesn't make it any less meaningful to the students it does serve and certainly doesn't argue for removing the option.

All of these new learning options exist in a constitutional framework that is frustratingly outdated, which is one reason two prominent and respected business groups recommended that we ask voters to re-examine how we serve our school-age children. Unfortunately, the same editorial that argues a ballot amendment could politicize these vital educational issues and confuse voters uses the same old, shallow rhetoric that does both.

Additional Facts

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