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Tax Credit Scholarship program gives students a second chance

By Doug Tuthill

The legislative push this year to strengthen a learning option for poor and struggling schoolchildren strikes a refreshing political balance. The bill, filed by Rep. Will Weatherford, says that private schools accepting scholarships need to reveal more about their test scores and finances, and the state needs to be fairer about enrollment and money.

This is the kind of middle course too often lost in modern politics, and the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship already is bringing together Republicans and Democrats.

One reason is that it serves students, such as Antonio Trigo, who is raised by his grandmother and was near failure until she chose a scholarship school for him. Last year he was valedictorian of his eighth-grade class and is now two years ahead of his peers on standardized tests. His school, Miami Union Academy, is mostly Haitian, graduates 96 percent of its students and sends 90 percent of them to postsecondary education.

Said Antonio recently: "You have given me a second chance at success."

The Tax Credit Scholarship is available only to students whose household income qualifies them for free or reduced lunch, and is serving 27,700 low-income K-12 students in 1,020 private schools.

Students who choose this program, according to a state-issued report last June, are among the poorest and lowest-performing in their former public schools. That same report said test-score gains for scholarship students in 2007-08 were on a par with students of all income levels nationally.

One thing that is unusual about this scholarship is that, while it is by far the state's lowest-cost education option, it is the only one with an arbitrary enrollment cap.

Weatherford's bill begins to address this oddity by allowing the cap to increase automatically once tax-credited contributions have reached 90 percent and by indexing the maximum scholarship, currently \$3,950, to four-fifths of the base spending formula for public-school students. That four-fifths translates to about half the total money spent per student in public schools, and means the scholarships would still cost taxpayers less than other options such as charter and virtual schools.

The bill also increases the program's transparency and accountability. Current standardized-test-score gains would be disclosed for schools with at least 30 scholarship students, and a financial review would be required for schools receiving at least \$250,000 in scholarship money.

Those provisions would make Florida's Tax Credit Scholarship the most transparent and accountable in the nation.

Some of our school-district friends oppose these scholarships because they help low-income children attend private schools, but the old public-versus-private wars are increasingly irrelevant.

Public education today is customizing learning options — including magnets, fundamentals, charters and online schools — to better match each child to the learning environment that best meets his or her needs.

Consider this: Some 137,000 students, or one in every 20, now attend a

private charter school — an alternative that didn't exist a generation ago.

The Tax Credit Scholarship has achieved bipartisan political support, in part because it is not a threat to public education. On the contrary, it is a learning option designed to help public education fulfill its historical commitment to provide equal opportunity to disadvantaged students.

Last year, when nearly half the Democrats, a majority of the Black Caucus and the entire Hispanic Caucus voted to support the program, an African-American Democrat from St. Petersburg rose to make a similar point. "By voting for this legislation," said Rep. Darryl Rouson, "we are not robbing public education of dollars. We are enhancing it. We are supplementing it where necessary."

This year, Weatherford, a Republican in line to become speaker, echoes the sentiment. "There's no doubt in my mind that public schools will always be the predominant way," he told a reporter, "but that doesn't mean parents shouldn't have a choice. All we're doing is empowering parents who come from a lower socioeconomic status."

Both men are right. This is a program where the average participating household income is only 20 percent above poverty. Three-fifths of the students are from single-parent households and three-fourths are of color. For these children, the scholarship can indeed represent a second chance. That's a learning option on which most lawmakers can find common ground.

Doug Tuthill, a former teachers union president, is president of Step Up For Students, a nonprofit organization that helps administer the Tax Credit Scholarship program.