TAX CREDIT SCHOLARSHIPS

Give poor families more school choices

BY RONALD BRIDE
www.myfloridahouse.gov

The diverse urban school district of Miami-Dade, where a hundred languages are spoken, is a national leader in the development of educational choices. The option we extend to the most underprivileged students is one of the most powerful.

The Tax Credit Scholarship is one way we fulfill our commitment of equal opportunity to poor children, and a legislative plan this year to strengthen the program deserves our support.

The bill filed by Rep. Will Weatherford, the Republican chairman of the House Education Policy Council, requires new academic and fiscal accountability and transparency for the 1,100 participating private schools. It mandates public reporting of learning-gain data and third-party reviews of financial statements. It also reduces the gap between the scholarship and the school tuition that low-income families must pay. These improvements will strengthen public oversight while enabling the program to keep up with student demand.

A state issued report last summer found that the students choosing these scholarships are among the poorest and lowest performing students in our public schools. We know that these parents, whose incomes average only 20 percent above poverty, are desperate enough to pay roughly $1,000 out of pocket to supplement the $3,950 scholarship. We also know from the most recent academic gains report that after at least one year on scholarship these students achieve the same standardized test-score gains as all test-takers at all income levels nationwide.

Miami-Dade parents and educators know well that one size does not fit all. Miami-Dade County Public Schools offer an impressive array of customized options — from an innovative elementary school operated by the University of Miami to a magnet high school for design and architecture. More Miami-Dade students attend charter schools (34,600) than all the students in Leon County. And 7,350 Dade students join the 27,600 statewide who are using Tax Credit Scholarships to attend schools that best meet their needs.

Some of my friends in public education worry that we can’t afford these scholarships in such dire budgetary times. But the reality is that this program actually helps the budget. The scholarship costs roughly a third of the total amount we spend for a public-school student, and the state’s government-accountability agency issued a report showing it saved taxpayers $39 million in 2007-08. That’s money we need for other critical state services.

No threat to public education

Some of my fellow Democrats are concerned that all these options represent a threat to public education, but they actually strengthen it. That’s why President Obama has called for doubling the number of private charter schools and why Florida Democrats are lining up to support bipartisan efforts to help give poor children more options.

Last year, almost half the Democrats, a majority of the Black Caucus and all the Hispanic Caucus voted to support this program. And if you need further evidence that old divisions are falling away, consider this: Last fall the Hillsborough public-school district and teachers union teamed up with the organization that distributes tax-credit scholarships in order to jointly train teachers in public and private schools.

Hillsborough superintendent MaryEllen Elia: “Ultimately, we all want to help teachers get better, wherever they’re teaching our kids.”

I see this same spirit of collaboration in the private schools that accept these scholarships, including the school from which I graduated — Miami Union Academy. Miami Union is a special place, with just over half of its 300 students on the scholarship. It serves students from kindergarten through high school, and roughly 85 percent are Haitian-American. The graduation rate is 96 percent, with 90 percent attending postsecondary education.

Life turned around

One of Miami Union’s freshmen, Antonio Trigo, is on the scholarship. Antonio was getting into fights and falling in school until his grandmother heard about the program.

She signed him up in seventh grade, and by eighth grade, he was named class valedictorian. He is now two years ahead of his peers on standardized tests and says the scholarship has given him “a second chance at success.”

This scholarship program is not for every child. But the reason I support it is the reason I insist we support all our public-education options. They work together to provide opportunity to students who need it the most.

Ronald Bride is the state representative for District 108 in Miami-Dade. He is a former school teacher and the current ranking Democrat on the House State Universities and Private Colleges Appropriations Committee.