



South Florida Sun-Sentinel

Published Friday, March 19, 2010

TALLAHASSEE SPOTLIGHT

Bill No.: HB 1009, SB 2126

Sponsor: Rep. Will Weatherford, Sen. Joe Negron, multiple co-sponsors

Topic: Strengthening Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program

Bill keeps school door open for poor kids

By Audrey B. Rodriguez

A bill to strengthen an 8-year-old scholarship for poor and struggling schoolchildren issues an important academic edict to participating private schools in Florida. It says they must reveal standardized test-score gains at each school. I say that's great.

Aukela Christian Military Academy in Hollywood is one of the 1,020 schools serving 27,600 low-income students across the state on the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, and we are proud of what we bring to the table. Our academics are rigorous and include standardized tests three times a year. Our students don't receive a high school diploma until they have been accepted into a post-secondary education institution. We insist that students wear uniforms and conduct themselves with courtesy, discipline and respect. We're not for every child, but for some, we are their salvation.

The Tax Credit Scholarship, created by the Legislature in 2001, has opened another educational door for students who sometimes just can't get on track. A study last year determined the program is attracting the poorest and lowest-performing students from public schools, and those students achieved the same learning gains as national test-takers at all income levels. Another study by the state Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability found the program saved tax-

payers \$39 million in 2007-08.

What most people don't know is this scholarship is also the lowest-cost option in public education. The maximum amount is \$3,950, roughly a third of what is spent on students in traditional public schools. Surprisingly, it is even \$1,550 less per year than what the state spends on online instruction.

More relevant to me is the fact that the gap between the scholarship and the tuition at participating schools has increased to the point where it is now pricing low-income families out of the program. The average tuition and fees this year across the state are \$6,335, and some families are dropping out because neither they nor the schools can afford the difference.

The bill Rep. Will Weatherford has filed this year (HB 1009) would help. The scholarship would be indexed to the base public school spending formula, increasing the amount over four years until it reaches four-fifths of that base formula. That would still make it about half the total amount, per-student, spent in public schools. The bill will also make it easier to accept more students in the future by allowing the cap to increase as student demand increases.

The plan also insists on more accountability from schools, and that's fair. Every student now is required to take a national norm-referenced test approved by the state, with the results disclosed statewide. This bill would require any school with at least 30 tested scholarship students to disclose learning gains and any school with at least \$250,000 in scholarship money to file a financial report prepared by a certified accountant.

I'm an educator, not a politician, but I like that this program is winning increasing bipartisan support. Last year, a scholarship bill won the support of nearly half the Democrats, a majority of the Black Caucus and the entire Hispanic Caucus. I think they see what we see in our schools. Statewide, these students come from households that are 20 percent above the poverty level. Three-fifths live with one parent, and three-fourths are black or Hispanic. We also know that many of them were failing in their previous schools. This bill is about keeping the door open to another learning option.

Audrey Rodriguez is principal of Aukela Christian Military Academy in Hollywood