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Tax credit scholarships don't undermine public schools

By DOUG TUTHILL

One reason Florida lawmakers found so much common ground this year on scholarships for low-income students may be that they understand the program is not a competitor to public schools. Bill Heller, the ranking Democrat on the House Education Policy Council and a lifelong public educator, made precisely that point.

"To me, a scholarship option for poor, struggling schoolchildren is in the greatest tradition of our collective commitment to equal educational opportunity," Rep. Heller, D-St. Petersburg, wrote recently. "I do not feel it is anti-public school but prochild, which is what every educator, public or private, supports and values."

He's right. I've spent most of my life in public education as well, and the real change is that we are beginning to customize learning because not all children learn in the same ways. We now offer students a cafeteria of options -- magnet programs, fundamental schools, dual enrollment, online courses, career academies, International Baccalaureate, charter schools, which didn't exist 15 years ago, now serve one in every 20 students.

In this expanding arena, the Tax Credit Scholarship is a learning option that is focused solely on children who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. The average household income last year was only 20 percent above poverty, and three-fourths of the students were black or Hispanic, three-fifths

from single-parent homes. These are children who suffer the greatest odds, and a state report in June found that those who take the scholarship are the lowest-performing and poorest students from the traditional public schools they leave behind.

In 2007-08, they achieved the same academic gains as students of all income levels nationally.

In a commentary published last week in *The St. Augustine Record*, educator Sandra Parks raised a fair question about whether the 1,020 participating private schools are held to appropriate academic standards. The good news is that the new legislation adds a critical component. Currently, all students are required to take a nationally norm-referenced test approved by the state Department of Education. The state uses those scores to evaluate whether students are measuring up academically. The new law goes another step -- requiring disclosure of gain scores for individual schools.

The new law will also allow the scholarship, now serving 27,700 students, to keep pace with demand and will eventually increase the amount to four-fifths of the per-student operational formula in public schools. Some of my education friends still worry that the scholarship undermines public school budgets, but the state's two most respected research agencies -- the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability and the Revenue Estimating Conference --

have found just the opposite. OPPAGA said the scholarship saved \$36-million last year that could be used to improve all public schools.

The encouraging political story is that Republicans and Democrats joined together to expand the program. Along with the Republican majority, nearly half the Democrats, a majority of the Black Caucus and nearly the entire Hispanic Caucus voted in favor of the bill. Some of them were in the Capitol courtyard last month when more than 5,500 low-income students, parents and educators rallied to have their voices heard.

Before the crowd that day, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference founded by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. endorsed the program.

"I hope people get that this is not about public schools versus private schools," acting SCLC president James Bush III said. "This is about reading and writing and diplomas and degrees. This is about finding the place where every single student learns best."

The point of the scholarship is not that these schools are necessarily better, but that they are different. They are but one option for students who have far too few.

Doug Tuthill is president of Step Up For Students, which oversees the Tax Credit Scholarship. He helped create the first International Baccalaureate high school in Florida, chaired the state committee that created Sunshine State Standards, and served as president of two teacher unions.