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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The more help, the better for at-risk students

The promise of scholarships for low-income children in Florida is not that the private schools they can attend are better. It is that they are different. They are different, just as every child is different and just as public schools themselves offer an increasing array of academic choices to meet their needs.

The bill that Gov. Crist signed to expand the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, then, is mostly an attempt to make sure that this option is available for every underprivileged student. If a school isn't working out, this might be the ticket. It certainly won't work for all the 1.2 million students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, but it seems to be doing nicely for the 27,700 students who are taking part.

The Palm Beach Post raises fair questions about whether the state knows enough about how well these children are performing in school. After all, these scholarships are financed with dollar-for-dollar state tax credits, and the schools must prove themselves to be academically sound.

To that point, the new law, which passed with strong bipartisan support, adds an important layer of accountability. It requires individual schools to reveal their academic gain scores from the nationally norm-referenced tests their scholarship students already are required to take. These national tests are not the FCAT, which private schools are forbidden from administering due to test security concerns. But they are

legitimate assessment tools and can help us assure these students are progressing.

This program is only 9 years old, and the new legislation takes a big step forward in providing the kind of independent assessment that is necessary. We know that most of the students who choose this scholarship already are struggling in school. The point is to give them another option.

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Editor's note: Jon East is communications director for Step Up For Students, which administers Florida's Tax Credit Scholarship Program. The program provides about \$110million in aid to 27,700 students.