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Guest columnist

School choices can be good for everyone



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Skepticism surrounding a new study that finds Florida public schools have improved as a result of a private learning option for poor children speaks more to psychology than methodology. For too long, some have erroneously thought more learning options for students hurt neighborhood schools.

What this study shows is that education improvement is not a zero-sum game. School-choice programs that help some students can also help students who don't choose them.

The report has attracted considerable attention in the research community because of the reputation of its author, Northwestern University economics and social-policy professor David Figlio, and its subject, the effects of competition from the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship. Figlio is known for rigorous techniques and careful conclusions, and he found the creation of the statewide scholarship to be an ideal laboratory.

The professor concluded: "Our results indicate that the increased competitive pressure faced by public schools associated with the introduction of Florida's FTC Scholarship Program led to general improvements in public-school performance."

So not only did this learning alternative for underprivileged students not hurt neighborhood schools, but those students remaining in their neighborhood schools actually benefited.

This fear of school choice hurting

neighborhood schools is not new. In my early years as a public school teacher, I helped create Florida's first International Baccalaureate program, and I heard the same concerns. Principals complained that an IB program at one school, St. Petersburg High, would drain the other high schools in Pinellas County of their high-achieving students, cripple their advanced-course offerings and undermine their student bodies.

That was 1984. A quarter-century later, IB programs are scattered throughout Florida and widely acclaimed for their ability to serve the needs of college-bound students. No one seriously questions their positive influence, in part because most surrounding high schools responded to the IB competition by getting better. They now offer their own specialties as well — including career education, the arts, criminal justice, science, fundamentals, dual college enrollment or advanced-placement courses.

Fueled by choice programs such as IB and tax-credit scholarships, the educational landscape is changing rapidly. We are now committed to empowering teachers to create more diverse learning options and enabling all parents to choose the options that work best for their children.

Who would have dreamed a generation ago that one of every 40 Florida students would be taking at least one course online? That one of every 20 would be attending a privately owned charter school? That one in five would attend a district school of choice?

The Tax Credit Scholarship program

is aimed at students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch in part because these students face the greatest odds and fewest choices. And much like the IB program, the evidence is proving this program strengthens education. In financial terms, a state government accountability agency reported this year that the scholarship is so much smaller than the amount spent in neighborhood schools that the program saves tax money—\$36.2 million in 2008-09 alone — that can be spent helping district schools.

Of course, the primary benefit to neighborhood schools comes from the thousands of high-poverty, low-performing students the program is serving. As a previous report found, the scholarship attracts the poorest and lowest-performing students from disproportionately low-performing public schools.

We know, for example, that in two adjacent Orlando Zip codes, 900 high-poverty students used scholarships to enroll in local private schools, allowing neighborhood schools to focus their resources on a smaller number of highly disadvantaged students. Ask any classroom teacher or school principal if reducing the concentration of high-poverty students in a school is a good idea.

Parents and teachers have always known that children learn in different ways. These studies help assure them that one child's solution does not come at another's expense.

Doug Tuthill, a former teacher union president, is president of Step Up For Students, a nonprofit organization that administers Tax Credit Scholarships.