

THE TAMPA TRIBUNE

LIFE. PRINTED DAILY.

Published Saturday, June 19, 2010

Competition boosts public schools

During a debate last February in Tallahassee on a proposal to expand a scholarship program that allows poor children to go to private schools, state Sen. Frederica Wilson decried the legislation.

“We’re taking children out of the public schools and making them weaker,” the Miami Democrat said. “This is not America.”

A recent study by a highly regarded Northwestern University researcher shows how wrong Wilson was. Florida voters are fortunate that the Legislature passed the bill and Gov. Charlie Crist signed it into law.

The study found public schools’ performance improved when they were faced with the possibility of losing students to private schools.

At issue is the Florida Tax Credit Scholarships, which provide vouchers to children from poor families.

Under the program, companies receive a tax credit by contributing to the scholarship funds, so state dollars are not directly used for the vouchers.

The study conducted by profes-

sor David Figlio found that the passage of the Tax Credit Scholarship program in 2001 led to standardized test score gains in the public schools most likely to lose students to private schools.

The improvements were small but consistent.

Figlio and co-author Cassandra Hart wrote, “The fact that we observed generalized improvements in school performance in response to the competitive threats of school vouchers, even in a state with rapid population growth, provides strong evidence that voucher competition may have effects elsewhere.”

Last year Figlio oversaw a study that found during the first year of the program scholarship recipients performed as well as similar students in public schools.

More importantly, his study found the program was being utilized by students who were among the poorest and most academically challenged in the public schools.

All this underscores the wisdom of the adopted bill. It gradually increases the per student award from 60 percent to 80 per-

cent of the amount given to public school students.

The measure also removed the \$118 million cap on how much can be spent, so the program can be expanded as corporate contributions increase.

Less noted were the accountability provisions the legislation enacted, including financial reviews and test-score reports from schools that accept scholarship students.

Giving struggling students the option to attend private schools reduces stresses and costs on the public school system. A legislative report estimated the corporate scholarships save taxpayers \$39 million a year because the state would otherwise spend about \$7,000 a year on each student. When federal and local taxes are also included, the figure is \$12,000.

The primary goal of the scholarship program is to give poor students more choices. But Figlio’s findings indicate in education, as in commerce, competition improves performance.

