

Opinion Broward

Where Opinion Leaders Meet

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The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program

Last week I was honored by the St. Anthony School Foundation for Education at its annual Gentlemen's Cigar Dinner. As Broward's oldest Catholic school, St. Anthony has produced, or been associated with, many influential names in town. You can start with Mayor Jack Seiler. There was a lot of clout in that record turnout at the Lauderdale Yacht Club. They contributed a nice piece of change to an endowment that was started in the 1980s and has grown steadily since.

Alas, not all schools are in the same boat as St. Anthony. Located on the east side of town, it serves affluent neighborhoods which have avoided the decline of so many older sections of cities where the original parishes are located. I noted that my old town, Philadelphia, has seen many closings of Catholic schools. As a kid I could have walked to four Catholic schools – the longest walk about 25 minutes – and the one I walked to once had about 1,400 kids. It is closed, as are the other three. They were once free, but with the decline (almost elimination) of religious teachers who worked for God's wages, tuitions have risen steadily. As neighborhoods went down, costs went up. Mission impossible.

The high schools have followed the grade schools. Some were just too small to justify their existence,

but this year a school that once had 5,000 boys is now down to hundreds and is scheduled to close after this year. So is another school that had 6,000 boys and girls, a school that was new when I was a senior in high school.

Broward and Dade counties have also seen school closings in recent months. Monsignor Vincent Kelly introduced the foundation concept at St. Thomas Aquinas almost 30 years ago, and it spread to all diocesan schools. But some inner city schools never had a chance. The foundation concept came too late.

Preoccupied as I was last week, I missed a story roaring by in the opposite direction. It took a Wall Street Journal piece, emailed by my brother in California, to get my attention. And what a story it potentially could be. While test scores and merit pay for teachers dominated the news, Gov. Charlie Crist signed into law a scholarship program that could transform Florida education, and as a by-product save many of the old Catholic schools.

It dramatically increases the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program, which uses money donated by businesses to fund vouchers for low-income families to attend private schools. According to writer Adam B. Schaeffer, it now includes almost 28,000 kids. The program isn't total altruism. Businesses get tax credits

for their donations. Schaeffer, an educational policy analyst, observes that this concept was not popular when introduced in 2001, but received overwhelming support from both Florida houses. The reason: It works in a twofold way. The state can save millions in tax payer money while improving the overall educational level. It is established that poorer kids do better in private schools.

The reasons are obvious. Lower overall administrative expense. Discipline and a tradition of respect. Kids who want to learn can learn without the distraction of peers who don't give a damn. A sociologist might argue that those who opt for private schools have a built-in advantage – even if they don't live with both parents, somebody in their family cares enough to put them there.

Now here's the drama. Schaeffer estimates that if this program grows as planned, "a girl born in Florida today might find that a third or more of her peers are being educated in private schools by the time she sets foot in high school."

And many of those private schools don't need to be built. They are here, and more than a few are struggling to survive. Florida's legislature may just have done more than save our children. It could also have saved a school system that has long proved its right to exist.