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New chances to succeed

Lawmakers right to OK school voucher program



By **DOUG TUTHILL**
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The worry that learning alternatives might hurt traditional neighborhood schools is nothing new. But as the factory model gives way to a renaissance of school options in Florida, no one need fear that a scholarship for poor children is an attack on the institution.

To borrow the words of Bill Heller, a lifelong public educator and ranking Democrat on the state House Education Policy Council:

“To me, a scholarship for poor, struggling schoolchildren is in the greatest tradition of our collective commitment to educational opportunity. I do not feel it is anti-public school but pro-child, which is what every educator, public or private, supports and values.”

Heller is not the only educator or Democrat in the Legislature to support the Tax Credit Scholarship for low-income students. In fact, in a session characterized by partisan division on education issues, nearly half the Democrats and a majority of the Black Caucus joined Republicans this spring to approve an expansion.

One reason is they understand that different children learn in different ways. Toward that end, the scholar-

ship fits alongside a growing expanse of choices that include fundamental schools, magnet programs, career academies, online course, dual college enrollment, prekindergarten vouchers and charter schools.

The only real difference is that this one is for students who tend to suffer the greatest odds.

FLORIDA TODAY, which is an important voice for public education, doesn't see it that way. Its recent editorial argued that the new law “sold out” public schools and is “giving away millions of tax dollars that would otherwise go in state coffers.” But such claims play largely on the fear of something different.

The unemotional truth is that the “million of tax dollars” are by law spent providing education to low-income students in private schools at roughly 40 cents on the public-school-spending dollar. So taxpayers actually come out ahead, a conclusion shared by four independent analyses.

The most recent report, from the state Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability, found that taxpayers save \$1.44 for every \$1 lost to the tax credit — money that can help traditional public schools.

The other reality is that students

are learning.

Though the private schools are forbidden from administering the FCAT, the scholarship students are required to take a nationally norm-referenced test approved by the state. From that, we know those who choose the scholarship are among the poorest and lowest-performing students from the public schools they leave behind.

We also know their standardized test score gains in 2008-09 kept pace with all students of all income levels nationally. The new law goes further, requiring disclosure of test score gains from individual schools.

FLORIDA TODAY is right to be vigilant about the progress of all students, and this program will need to prove its worth. But the 27,700 students who chose this option last year, students who live on average just 17 percent above poverty, are not a threat.

They are simply looking for something that works for them, and they deserve a public education system that gives them every conceivable chance to succeed.

Tuthill, a former president of two teacher unions in Florida, is president of Step Up For Students, a nonprofit organization that helps oversee Tax Credit Scholarships.