

School options need to be part of debate



JULIO FUENTES

My View

The reason a coalition of black, Hispanic and Jewish leaders in Florida is so passionate about learning options for poor children is much the same reason people across this country are being reduced to tears by a new documentary film called "Waiting For Superman." What hurts us is to see any child denied a genuine education opportunity.

The good news in Florida is that schoolchildren already have more options than those in New York and Los Angeles and other inner cities where filmmaker Davis Guggenheim conveyed the heart-wrenching results of lotteries for highly coveted and successful charter schools.

But what we hope to bring to the gubernatorial campaign debate here is an acceptance of what Guggenheim, known widely for his previous documentary on global warming, might call a convenient truth. The truth is that learning options make our public education system stronger, not weaker.

Both the Democratic nominee Alex Sink and Republican nominee Rick Scott have released their education plans at this point, and our coalition is pleased that both have embraced the need for the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, which is now serving roughly 32,000 low-income children in more than 1,000 private schools across the state. That kind of bipartisan endorsement is also evident in the Legislature, where a bill expanding the program this year became law with the support of nearly half the Democrats, a majority of the black caucus and all but one of the Hispanic caucus.

Scott, frankly, has more readily embraced the broad array of education choices that include scholarships for low-income or disabled students, charter schools, magnet and fundamental programs, online learning, dual college enrollment and career academies. Though we are concerned that his tax reform eliminates a primary source for the Tax Credit Scholarship, we trust that he will find suitable alternatives.

Sink is cautious about expansion, telling reporters recently that the tax credit program needs proper fiscal and academic accountability. She is right, of course, but her prescription suggests she may still view learning alternatives as though they are somehow in conflict with traditional neighborhood schools.

She is wary about expanding the tax credit program, for example, until traditional schools are better funded. But that assumes the scholarships come at the expense of traditional schools, which is indisputably false. Four different independent groups have determined that, because the scholarship costs less than half the overall per-student allocation in a district school, it actually saves tax money that can enhance other public schools. In 2008-09, the savings was \$36.2 million.

Sink also calls on scholarship students to take the FCAT, even as her own education plan says the test "must be reformed" and the state should "expand how students and schools are assessed." What she may not know is that private schools are prohibited from administering the FCAT, due to security concerns, and scholarship students are required to take a nationally norm-referenced test approved by the state. The latest report shows the program is attracting some of the lowest-performing students from public schools and that, in 2008-09, they achieved the same gains as students of all income levels nationally.

The point of learning options is not necessarily that they are better, but that they are different. International Baccalaureate is a highly acclaimed program for high-achieving high-school students and often sends graduates to Ivy League universities. But a substantial number of students end up dropping out, because it is a bad educational fit for them.

The same is true of the Tax Credit Scholarship. The participating private schools, many of them small, faith-based and mission-driven, have helped turn around the lives of many struggling students. But they are not the solution for all low-income students, many of whom do well in their district schools.

The reason our coalition is in this fight is to ensure that the door of opportunity remains open to every child. We won't accept that a child's academic destiny is tied to a street address or ZIP code. Every parent has the right to choose a learning program in which his or her child can be stimulated academically and challenged to succeed in life, and there is nothing political or partisan about that.

About the author: Julio Fuentes is president of the Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options. The coalition, which includes black ministers, rabbis, civil rights leaders, Hispanic businesses and public school teachers, held a news conference in Fort Lauderdale on Monday to challenge the gubernatorial candidates.

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