

The Florida Times-Union

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Tax credit scholarships needed

Every public education program needs to be assessed, and here is the most recent assessment for the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, a 9-year-old learning option for low-income school children:

The students who choose this scholarship are among the state's poorest, three-fourths of them black or Hispanic and three-fifths living with one parent. They also tend to be

in academic meltdown.

In the words of a state researcher: "Scholarship participants have significantly poorer test performance in the year prior to starting the scholarship program than do non-participants."

Though low-income students tend to continue to fall behind, these students, in 2008-09, scored the same reading and math gains as students of all income levels nationally.

These results don't necessarily prove the program is a success. But it is unfortunate that The Florida Times-Union, in a front-page story, would use the lack of a state-administered Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test as justification to brand this program a failure. That's nonsense.

Testing, after all, is a means to an end. In this case, the end is a viable learning option for low-income students.

In fact, public education is expanding options for all students, including alternatives such as magnet programs, fundamental schools, online courses, dual high school and college enrollment, charter schools and scholarships for disabled students.

These options strengthen public education by recognizing that different students learn in different ways.

In the past six years, enrollment in the Tax Credit Scholarship program has tripled to roughly 32,000. Another 3,000 children on a waiting list. The attraction is so strong that these families, with average incomes only 17 percent above poverty, pay nearly \$1,000 out of pocket to make up the difference between the \$4,106 scholarship and the average tuition and fees.

Their satisfaction is so high that the schools received a 95.4 percent approval rating in 2009, with scholarship parents rating their school excellent at three times the rate of other low-income parents.

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Florida law currently prohibits private schools from administering the FCAT due to testing security concerns, and Tax Credit Scholarship students make up, on average, only 17 percent of the enrollment at the private schools they attend.

So, to take the FCAT, a scholarship student must find a public school and end up taking two batteries of tests in different weeks.

The other reality is that the debate over testing continues to evolve, with Florida participating in national standards that could eliminate the FCAT. The state is already moving away from the FCAT in favor of end-of-course exams in high school, and Hillsborough County recently decided to add the Stanford Achievement Test because the FCAT lacks national comparison. Not incidentally, nearly three-fourths of Tax Credit Scholarship students take the Stanford.

Many of my friends in public education worry that giving students these options hurts the traditional schools financially, but we have four independent studies showing the scholarships actually save tax money that can be used to enhance other public schools.

Then there are also the stories of students such as Denisha Merriweather, who was getting into fights and headed toward failure before her godmother intervened seven years ago and put her in Esprit De Corps Center for Learning in Jacksonville. This fall, Denisha entered the University of West Florida and says: "Without the scholarship, I probably would have dropped out of school."

Legislation expanding this scholarship passed this year because Democrats and Republicans alike know these children face the greatest odds with the fewest options.

They are the underprivileged students for whom we make a collective promise of equal opportunity.

Doug Tuthill is president of Step Up for Students, which oversees the scholarship program. . . .

IN REPLY
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