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School choice for underprivileged students is beyond partisanship, with Florida in the lead, John Kirtley writes

Tampa businessman John Kirtley almost single-handedly created Florida's corporate tax credit scholarship program for low-income children, a program he now runs. He's known nationally for his efforts on behalf of school choice, a subject that landed him on Gov.-elect Rick Scott's education transition team. We're trying to get our local members of the team to talk about the education issues that matter to them as they advise Scott. Last week Hillsborough schools superintendent MaryEllen Elia spoke with the Gradebook, and this week Kirtley submitted this essay.

"For far too long, the important debate over whether we should provide private learning options for low-income schoolchildren has been a source of friction in education circles and partisan combat in political quarters. But when Oprah Winfrey spotlights the desperate needs of these children and some of the private schools that are turning around their lives, we can safely conclude this issue is now mainstream.

The impetus for Oprah's involvement has been the documentary film, Waiting for Superman, which illustrates how some disadvantaged children in urban communities in New York, Washington and Los Angeles have found new hope in charter schools that are focusing specifically on their needs. What often gets missed in the talk over whether the film's message is anti-public education, though, is the lineup of people who are advancing the cause.

The director himself, Davis Guggenheim, is a self-professed liberal who gained fame for his work with Al Gore in the global warming documentary, An Inconvenient Truth. In his film and on the public tour that has surrounded it, we have seen education philanthropists Bill and Melinda Gates, Harlem Children's Zone founder Geoffrey Canada, Grammy-winner John Legend, U.S. education secretary Arne Duncan, and parents of all different races, ethnicity and politics who were reduced to tears at an MSNBC-sponsored screening.

This is becoming the new face of a movement to put all our educational tools on the table for underprivileged students, and Florida is a prime example.

In 2001, the State Legislature created the Tax Credit Scholarship for low-income students with a strong Republican majority and a lone Democrat vote. Earlier this year, the Legislature expanded and strengthened the program with the support of nearly half the Democrats, a majority of the Black Caucus and all but two of the Hispanic Caucus. The bill was cosponsored in the House by the ranking Democrat on the Education Policy Council who also is a lifelong public educator. The closing argument for the bill in the Senate was made by a prominent African-American who was the Democratic leader in the chamber.
"I know in my community how these kids are doing and how much they have been able to benefit from this," Sen. Al Lawson, D-Tallahassee, told his colleagues, “and I will tell you that you should just embrace these kids and listen to these kids and what they tell you about how rewarding it has been."

"I’m a tireless supporter of public education," echoed Sen. Gary Siplin, an African-American Democrat from Orlando. "I think teachers, especially those in low-income neighborhoods, are heroes. But I also know that every child is different, and not every child will do well in their neighborhood public schools."

As we look across the national landscape now, we see coalitions for parental choice that would have been unimaginable a generation ago.

New Jersey’s white Republican governor, Chris Christie, has joined with Newark’s black Democratic mayor, Cory Booker, to work in the upcoming legislative session to create a tax credit scholarship program for low-income students that is modeled after Florida. The bill has prominent Democrat sponsors. When New Jersey teacher union members filed a Senate committee room earlier this year to keep out parents there to support the bill, the committee’s Democratic chairman moved the hearing outdoors to the delight of hundreds of people who had traveled to the capitol in support.

In Indiana, Republican Governor Mitch Daniels has made education options a top priority and is pushing a voucher program that favors lower-income students. In Pennsylvania, a prominent African-American Democratic senator, Anthony Williams, is leading the effort to create a voucher program for poor children. In New Mexico, newly elected Republican Gov. Susana Martinez may well join with Democratic sponsors in both legislative chambers to push for a tax credit scholarship option modeled on Florida’s. Similar bills are being readied in Tennessee and Oklahoma. In the race for Chicago’s mayor, two of the Democratic candidates are calling for a voucher program for low-income children in the city.

During his own campaign in Florida, Gov.-elect Rick Scott strongly embraced educational choice. His transition team, on which I am privileged to serve, also includes members who agree with that approach. In years past, this would certainly be viewed by my friends in public education with alarm and might be branded as partisan. But let me share two quotes that frame the issue succinctly.

"I want to create an education program that will allow parents to get creative in how to meet the distinctive needs of their children. I do not believe every child should be forced into just one method of being educated if that method is not working."

"Instead of rewarding failure, we only reward success. Instead of funding the status quo, we only invest in reform. ... And in this country, the success of our children cannot depend more on where they live than on their potential."

The first is from Gov.-elect Scott and the second is from President Obama, and they express a belief that is increasingly shared by all Americans. We know that different children learn in different ways, and we are excited that public education is offering more and more options, such as magnets, career academies, online courses, open enrollment, and charter schools and other alternatives.

We also know that children who suffer from economic disadvantage deserve every option we can provide, and scholarships for them are fully consistent with our social commitment to provide equal education opportunity."