



## Scholarships not about competition

### Al Lawson

Some of the apprehension in Virginia over scholarships for low-income schoolchildren sounds familiar. I, too, once had doubts. But what I've seen over the past decade in Florida has opened my eyes and warmed my heart. To me, giving this option to the least among us is what public education is all about.

Take Denisha Merriweather as an example. She had so much trouble in elementary school, getting into fights and resisting her teachers, that she failed third grade twice. Not until her godmother found the Tax Credit Scholarship and the Esprit De Corps Center for Learning in Jacksonville did her world begin to change. And change it did. Denisha finished high school with a 3.8 GPA and as statewide vice president of the Youth Directors Council. She is now a freshman at the University of West Florida, the first in her family to attend college, and has dreams of a career in orthodontics.

Students such as Denisha are the reason that, as Senate Democratic leader, I co-sponsored tax credit scholarship legislation last year. So is Otis Young, who grew up in the free-lunch line and ended up rising to a public school administrator's job only to

leave it to open the Innovation School of Excellence so he could inspire hope for poor black students in our state's capital. Elder Young, like many prominent black ministers in Florida, has seen that the scholarship is a tool to advance their own mission of helping children of color break the cycle and close the gap.

I voted against the scholarship in Florida when it was first created in 2001 because I figured it was just another school voucher scheme aimed at hurting public schools. But I was wrong.

Today, the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship serves more than 33,000 students in 1,100 private schools and it complements, not competes with, traditional public schools. The scholarship is only for students whose household income qualifies for free or reduced-price lunch.

It was intended to help students who struggle, and we now know from state research that those who choose the scholarship are among the lowest-performing students in public schools. It costs \$4,106 per student, or 60 percent of what we pay in traditional public school, and we now know from the respected state Office of Public Policy and Government Accountability that it saved taxpayers \$36.2 million in 2008-09. That's money that can

help other public schools.

Last year, the Florida Legislature passed a major expansion of the program by a collective House-Senate margin of 122-34, including the support of nearly half the Democrats, a majority of the Black Caucus and all but two of the Hispanic Caucus. In the Senate, I was extended the privilege of making the closing arguments on behalf of the bill, and I simply told my colleagues to embrace what these children and their parents are telling us.

Listen, these scholarships are no panacea. But the reality is that different children learn in different ways, which is why public education today offers all types of options, including magnet programs, career academies, International Baccalaureate, online courses and charter schools. This just happens to be one that is focused solely on economically disadvantaged children -- the very students who suffer the greatest odds in modern education, barely half of whom, in Florida, read at grade level.

This is about all of us doing our best to help these children. They deserve it.

*Lawson left the Florida Legislature last year after 28 years as a representative, senator and Democratic leader of the Senate. He plans today to testify before the Virginia Senate Finance Committee.*