

Tuesday, June 12, 2012

School vouchers are not a right-wing plot



By RON MATUS

Guest Columnist

If you think private school vouchers are a right-wing conspiracy, schedule a visit to the Waldorf Sarasota. The tiny school's approach to learning defies easy labels, but it puts a premium on physical play and creativity. Cooking, gardening and knitting socks are in. Textbooks, computers and Capri Suns are out. But for one exception, so are tests.

Still not convinced? Talk to the parents and staff.

At the risk of blatant stereotyping, let's just say Waldorf parents are more likely than most to embrace backyard composters and love that their kids are building bamboo tepees at school. It's a safe bet they're not in cahoots with people who hate teachers unions and public schools.

Yet there's Waldorf Sarasota, solidly in the choice camp.

The fast-changing landscape of education in Florida is dotted with other square pegs that don't fit the story line.

Two Waldorf schools (there are 160 nationwide) participate in Florida's tax-credit scholarship program, which is only available to low-income families who qualify for free- or reduced-price lunch. At Waldorf Sarasota, eight of 34 students use tax-credit scholarships. At Suncoast Waldorf in Pinellas County, 19 of 108 do.

The ranks of tax-credit schools also include some 40 Montessori schools and a handful of others that are proudly out of the mainstream. (State law mandates

that tax-credit students in grades three through 10 take a nationally norm-referenced test, which is why Waldorf Sarasota has one exception to its no-test rule.)

So, forget what you heard. School choice, in fact, has deep roots all across the political spectrum.

In a 2005 journal article, Georgetown University law professor James Forman Jr. cataloged how progressives have been a leading voice for choice from Reconstruction to the civil rights era. His provocative title: "The Secret History of School Choice: How Progressives Got There First."

The son of civil rights activists, Forman doesn't hide his agenda. He wants to give modern progressives -- the source of so much fiery opposition to vouchers and tax credit scholarships -- good reason to think twice.

That is happening. In 2001, when the Florida Legislature created the tax credit scholarship program, one Democratic lawmaker voted in support. In 2010, when the program was dramatically expanded, nearly half did.

In Louisiana this spring, lawmakers drew national headlines when they created a statewide voucher program. But virtually no newspaper mentioned that their effort was bipartisan, with 12 of 45 Democrats in the House and seven of 15 in the Senate voting in favor. That oversight is odd, considering how often stories about vouchers will note the support of say, the American Legislative Exchange Council or former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush.

All this isn't to deny that many con-

servatives strongly back school choice, or that they have led the charge in recent years, or to dismiss the compelling arguments they make. The choice community is not monolithic. At the risk of again overgeneralizing, some supporters stress the free market and competitive aspects a little more; some put more emphasis on social justice. To many, both arguments make sense.

To many, the issue is also so much more fundamental.

"We believe Waldorf is really wonderful elementary education, so if it can be available to more children, that's great," said Nikosha Orchard, the enrollment director at Waldorf Sarasota and a former Waldorf teacher. "Private school shouldn't be elitist. If we have something beneficial to offer children, it'd be great to offer it across the board."

Too often, our support or opposition to a complicated policy issue is not based on its merits, but on which "side" we think is pushing it. Dispelling the myth that school choice is a conservative plot will allow more people to channel their energy into an effort that really needs all hands on deck. That's figuring out how we can best expand learning options in a fair, responsible way -- so more kids get the opportunity to live out their dreams it.

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