Opinion

Give Florida’s needy a tool for school success

Editor’s note: This is a response to a Tampa Bay Times editorial published Monday, “Romney’s divisive play for vouchers.”

Don’t look for me to help elect Mitt Romney president, but those who use the presidential election as a partisan guide to private learning options for low-income children are playing their own brand of education politics.

In Florida and across this nation, many die-hard Democrats and hard-core public education advocates are standing up to insist that our most disadvantaged schoolchildren are provided with every tool available. We see it as a moral imperative.

Look around. A tax credit scholarship proposal in New Jersey is being led by a Republican governor and an African-American mayor from Newark who is viewed as a rising star in the Democratic Party. Expanded vouchers and a new tax rebate scholarship in Louisiana were passed with bipartisan support. A similar bill just filed in North Carolina includes four Democratic sponsors and is being pushed by a racially diverse, politically progressive parental advocacy group. In Florida, the Tax Credit Scholarship was expanded in 2010 with the support of nearly half the Democrats, a majority of the black caucus and all but one of the Hispanic caucus.

This is not liberal or conservative, public or private. It’s common sense. Different children learn in different ways, and for too long we have tried the same cookie-cutter approach with tragic results, especially for black children.

The Tampa Bay Times has reported the grim statistics: Pinellas black students rank last in reading and math among the state’s largest school districts; the achievement gap in reading between blacks and whites is a staggering 35 percentage points. The Schott Foundation has concluded that the county has one of the lowest graduation rates for black males in the nation.

When the Times’ editorial board criticizes these options as “dangerous” and speaks wistfully of melting pots and generational progress, it is stubbornly out of touch with modern reality. What I see in Florida is a scholarship that is enthusiastically embraced by low-income parents, that is showing consistent academic gains for the students, and is doing so at no academic or fiscal cost to traditional options. Further, the students who are being helped — two-thirds of whom are black or Hispanic, three-fifths from single-parent homes, their average income only 12 percent above poverty — are precisely the ones for whom our collective commitment to equal education opportunity is most salient.

This is nothing more, really, than an extension of the path on which public education is now rapidly traveling. Public schools have begun to move beyond the traditional multipurpose neighborhood school to begin tailoring programs to the needs of individual students. How can those who support magnet programs, fundamental schools, career academies, dual college enrollment, online courses and the prestigious International Baccalaureate begrudge an option aimed at struggling children who otherwise lack the financial means?

The Florida scholarship is serving 40,000 students this year, and what we have learned over the past decade has helped to dispel many legitimate fears of public educators. First, the scholarship is not skimming the poorest and lowest-performing students from the public schools they leave behind. Second, the scholarship is not hurting schools financially. Four different independent evaluations have all determined that it saves tax money that can be used to help traditional public schools. Third, the scholarship is not undermining the success of traditional public schools. An academic study released in 2010 found that the public schools most impacted by the loss of scholarship students are in fact increasing their own test scores at an impressive rate.

This option is no panacea, but I have seen it turn around some children’s lives. We’re smart enough to know that you can’t plant roses in every environment. Why don’t we use that same wisdom with children?

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