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MY WORD DOUG TUTHILL

Scholarships help equalize opportunity

Public Florida allocates five different scholarships from pre-kindergarten to college that allow students to attend faith-based schools. They don't violate the U.S. Constitution because students choose, and government doesn't coerce.

Both factors were why, in 2002, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that a Cleveland school voucher did not violate the Establishment Clause, even as 96 percent of the students chose faith-based schools. To the court, in the landmark *Zelman v. Simmons-Harris* case, the program met three critical standards that also apply to Florida: The primary objective is education; students can choose among secular and sectarian schools; and parents exercise an independent choice that is not steered by government.

The article "Many church schools get tax cash" in Sunday's Orlando Sentinel did not mention the *Zelman* case or that the Florida Supreme Court specifically avoided religion in 2006, when it overturned the private-school portion of the Opportunity Scholarship program. Consequently, readers might have thought that these programs are constitutionally suspect, when they are not.

The tax-credit scholarship is one of Florida's five scholarships. It strives to give low-income students



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access to the same learning options now available to more affluent families, via a \$4,335 scholarship. This program complements other choice programs, such as magnet and charter schools, and is built on the truism that students learn in different ways. Last year, parents placed more than 1.2 million public-education students in schools other than their assigned district school.

In this new world of customized learning, encouraging differentiated instruction while maintaining quality control is a challenge. The tax-credit scholarship does this, in part, by requiring nationally norm-referenced tests that show these students are achieving the same gains in reading and math as students of all income levels.

Parent satisfaction is important as well, since these schools receive scholarship students only if their parents choose them. One mother, whose two sons attend St. Andrew Catholic School in Pine Hills, told the Sentinel: "If I had a million dollars, my school of choice would be the school I have now."

This parent's choice was motivated, in part, by her faith, she says, but religion is not the enemy here; poverty, hopelessness and lost opportunity are. Scholarships for low-income children strengthen public education and our democracy by expanding equal opportunity.

Doug Tuthill is president of Step Up for Students, headquartered in Tampa.