

The Florida Times-Union

Wednesday

SEPTEMBER 3, 2014

\$2

Scholarship program deserves praise

point of view

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If it wasn't for school choice, Denisha Merriweather says you'd probably see her on the corner, with a baby, trying

to make ends meet.

She wasn't doing well in public school in Jacksonville and says she would have probably dropped out.

But then she received a tax credit scholarship to attend a private school, Esprit de Corps Center for Learning, and her life took an amazing turn.

Her grades improved. She graduated. And last May, she became the first member of her family to earn a four-year college degree.

There are many students in Duval like Denisha — students who just need a different learning environment to blossom into the successful young men and women we want them to be, know they can be and need them to be.

The scholarship program, which is serving 4,961 students this year, is one of many tools we have to help them get there.

As a School Board member, I support it.

I know it does not come at the expense of other options, including Duval County public schools, of which I am immensely proud.

LAWSUIT SEEKS TO END PROGRAM

But now the Florida School Boards Association, the teachers union and other groups are trying to kill the program.

On Thursday, they filed suit to have it declared unconstitutional even though it's been in existence for 13 years and this fall will help nearly 70,000 low-income families, most of them black and Hispanic.

In all honesty, I am appalled.

Why in the world would anyone attack a program that was designed to help the students who are the most vulnerable and the most struggling?

It's not because of financial impact. Over the years, one independent study after another has examined whether tax credit scholarships are "draining" money from public schools, and each one has concluded it does not.

The most recent analysis, by the state's Consensus Revenue Estimating Conference, projected the scholarships would save the state \$58 million in 2012-13. (The analysis did not consider additional savings to local districts or to school construction spending.)

The big reason is taxpayers pay about half as much for each scholarship, \$5,272

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this year, as they do for each student in public school.

We know the opposition isn't because of academic results, either. The scholarship students are required by law to take standardized tests, and for seven years now the results have been required by law to be analyzed by David Figlio, a top-notch researcher at Northwestern University.

He's found the scholarship students were on average the lowest performers in the public schools they attended. But now in their new schools, they're making the same learning gains as students of all income levels nationally. Figlio also found competition from the program boosted learning gains in public schools.

TURFISM AT ISSUE

So what's the problem? Sadly, it involves turf and power. If we truly wanted what was best for our kids, we wouldn't care what kind of school they succeeded in — only that they succeeded.

It's past time for all of us to put aside the fights we're having over school types, whether district or charter or private or virtual, and focus on the bigger problems that continue to fester.

Last year, only 48 percent of the 10th graders in Duval public schools were reading at grade level, which they must be able to do to graduate.

The numbers for low-income and minority students were even lower.

I don't bring that up as a knock on our public schools. Our teachers, principals and other employees work incredibly hard. They make miracles happen every day.

But the truth is, when it comes to fighting poverty and illiteracy, public schools need all the help they can get.

Tax credit scholarships and private schools aren't the end-all-be-all, but they are part of the solution.

For the sake of Denisha and other kids like her, let's don't turn down anything that can help.

Jason Fischer is a father, businessman and the Duval County School Board member from District 7.