



# Florida Senator: Why I am fighting for school choice, a lifeline for low-income kids

By Sen. Marco Rubio



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Parents everywhere share a common dream: we all want our children to have the chance at a life better than our own. This has propelled the progress of our nation and has become an essential part of the American Dream. To give children this chance, every parent should be given the right to choose the learning environment that best fits their child's unique needs.

In the 21st century, the definition of "public education" is changing rapidly. It used to mean giving school districts all

the taxpayer dollars raised to educate kids, and letting the districts assign children to public schools according to zip code. Fortunately, we are moving to a new definition: letting parents direct taxpayer funds—with proper accountability—to different providers, even different delivery methods.

Last year in my home state of Florida, over 40% of children educated with taxpayer funds didn't attend their zoned public school. They attended district run magnet schools, charter schools, virtual schools and dual enrollment programs with colleges. This customization has enabled Florida to have great achievement gains for its lower-income and minority children over the last decade.

For 13 years, Florida's Tax Credit Scholarship Program has played a critical role in this progress. The program provides tax credits to companies that donate to scholarship-granting organizations. It's been so successful in Florida that I used it as a model for federal legislation I've introduced.

Today roughly 68,000 low-income parents use the program to send their child to a school that better fits his or her unique learning needs. Test scores show that these children were the lowest performers in their public schools when they left but now see learning gains equal to children of all incomes.

Incredibly, in spite of this clear success, the Florida teachers union and the Florida School Boards Association filed suit in August to shut down the program.

Should the suit succeed, these 68,000 needy children – 70% of which are either African-American, or of Hispanic or Haitian descent – will be evicted from their chosen schools. Further, hundreds of private schools in Florida serving minority children will be forced to close their doors.

Although this is happening in Florida, it should concern all parents across the entire country who want and deserve the free-

dom and opportunity to give their kids better education options.

It is also not some abstract legal case. These are real people.

I've personally visited some of these schools and talked to parents and children whose lives have been touched by this program. I'm outraged that unions have put their own wants over the needs of these children and families.

The teachers union claims to be suing to end the program because funding has "reached a tipping point."

But that simply isn't true. The program represents less than 2% of our state's K-12 budget, and it actually saves taxpayers over \$50 million every year.

The real reason the union wants to shut the program down is simple: it doesn't like having to compete with private schools for lower-income students.

If the courts side with the union and end this program, it will directly threaten other critical choice programs, including our McKay Scholarships for special needs children, Florida's pre-K voucher program, and our Bright Futures college scholarship program. These programs also allow children to attend faith based private schools and colleges, including many historically Black Colleges.

Put simply, Florida's Tax Credit Scholarship Program is an example of public policy at its best. It should outrage all Floridians – and all Americans – that the program is under attack by those who would rather protect their own narrow interests than

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the rights of parents and the well-being of children. Some say their selfish approach is just politics. I say it's a moral outrage.

We live in an age of innovation, when consumers are presented with an incredible array of choices in almost every aspect of life. Why would we cling to a definition of public education rooted in the 19th – not even the 20th – century? In education, there should be uniformity of opportunity, not uniformity of delivery.

For hundreds of thousands of children and parents, Florida's Tax Credit Scholarship Program has brought the American Dream within reach. An attack on it is an attack on our shared ideals of opportunity, choice, and freedom.

As a representative of this state and a supporter of all parents' opportunity to give their kids a better future, I won't stand for it. Together, we should raise our voices in defense of this program. Thousands of children are counting on us.

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