School choice scholarships: Not about public vs. private

MICHELLE PACHECO | Guest columnist

The teachers-union officials who want a court to shut down scholarships for economically disadvantaged students in Florida are treating private schools as though they are enemies, but they haven’t visited mine.

At Potter’s House Academy in Orlando, we’re good neighbors with Ventura Elementary, a public school whose cafeteria is not big enough for concerts and Christmas plays. So we gladly let the school use our place instead. After a Ventura student died in a car accident, the church that houses our school conducted the funeral.

Maybe I am naïve, but I see public and private schools with mostly the same educational goals — to help children succeed in life. Maybe that’s why I’m confused about a lawsuit that deems this scholarship for poor children to be “nunniform” and “separate” and “parallel.” For parents, these are simply schools — and they either work well or not so well for their child.

Some 67,000 low-income students are using tax-credit scholarships in Florida this year, including about 6,500 in Orange County. Here at Potter’s House, we have 155 students on scholarship. They would not be able to attend without them. Eighty percent are Hispanic. Most are being raised by single moms. They have huge challenges in their lives, as do the children at Ventura.

Just like our talented counterparts at Ventura, we are working as hard as we can to help our students rise above. I have never seen us as being in competition. I see us helping them, and them helping us, and all of our children being better for it. Like them, we are not in it for the money. Like them, we want what’s best for our children and community.

That doesn’t mean we are carbon copies of each other — and that’s a good thing. For some students, different is better. That’s the whole point behind school choice and tax-credit scholarships.

We started Potter’s House five years ago with 55 students. Now we have 233 in K-8 and 16 in pre-school. More parents want their children in than we can take, and there are many reasons why.

We are a small school, so we are able to give more one-on-one attention in a family atmosphere. We teach our students to say “yes ma’am” and “no ma’am” and to dress right. We focus on mentoring, particularly with boys, with my husband Jose Pacheco, the campus chaplain, being a father figure to many of them. And God is in the mix of everything we do. We pray with our students. They know we love them and will fight for them.

We don’t have a magic wand, but we do have these things, and we know they work without hurting the public schools. One set of rigorous studies show the tax-credit scholarships, worth $5,272 this year, actually save public schools money because it would cost public schools close to twice as much to educate the same students. Other studies show that scholarship students, often the lowest performers in public schools, are now making solid academic gains on standardized tests.

At Potter’s House, we know the students behind those statistics. We’ve seen kids who come here with potty mouths become scholars. We’ve seen kids who used to fight a lot turn a corner and put together Thanksgiving baskets for needy families.

People who say private schools don’t have accountability haven’t met our moms, especially the ones who have been through our parent workshops. If they are not happy with their child’s performance, they phone, they email, they wait in the lobby, and if they still don’t get the answers they deserve, they knock on my door.

The parents who put their children at Potter’s House and keep them here don’t do it because it’s public or private. They do it because it is working for their children. And that’s all this scholarship program is about. It gives underprivileged children more learning options, which is something that should unite us as educators.

Michelle Pacheco is campus director at Potter’s House Academy.