Tax credit scholarship levels learning fields

Those of us who have committed our lives to equality can’t abide an academic achievement gap that continues to be defined by color and income. That’s why a new lawsuit by Florida’s teacher union and school boards is so hard to stomach.

These groups, representing both management and labor in traditional public schools, are asking the court to throw 70,000 of the state’s poorest students off a program that appears to be helping. Cutting through the legalese, their beef is basically about turf. They sued because these low-income students on the 13-year-old Tax Credit Scholarship are being taught in private schools.

“For us, we want to make sure that all students, and please hear me when I say that, we want to make sure that all students have a high-quality public education and have access to that,” Florida Education Association vice president Joanne McCall said. “…And public schools are the ones that provide that.”

That kind of paternalism would be more reassuring if it didn’t treat 70,000 students as though they don’t count. We were also once told that separate was equal, and then that desegregated schools would reduce the achievement gap. But the truth is that wealthy children have always had choices, whether to neighborhood with favored public schools or private schools that only money can buy. The union cries foul when that privilege is extended to those of meager financial means.

What makes this all the more maddening is that the lawsuit treats the scholarship as though it is an attack on public schools. It is but one learning option out of many, and this kind of academic diversity strengthens public education by allowing students to find the program or school that works best for them.

The private schools that receive this $5,272 scholarship are not necessarily better than the public school alternatives. They’re different, and sometimes that’s all it takes.

Many of the scholarship schools are run by those whose religious faith motivates them to help the least among us, which is why so many Catholic schools and black clergy participate. When you walk through the halls of John McKinney Christian Academy in Miami, you feel the personal mission of Bishop Victor T. Curry, an African-American faith leader who understands education is the path to equality.

We hold no animus toward traditional public schools. They remain the lifeblood of education. But the world is changing, and education needs to change as well. Last year, 1.5 million preK-12 students in Florida attended something other than their neighborhood-assigned district school — such as magnets, career academies, virtual courses, dual college enrollment, charter schools, scholarships based on special needs or income. These options complement each other and let parents find the school that works best for their child.

As for the Tax Credit Scholarship, we have 13 years of encouraging evidence. First, parents are clamoring for it, with a six-fold enrollment growth over the past decade. Second, scholarship students were the poorest and lowest achievers from the public schools they left behind, and they are now achieving the same standardized test score gains as students of all income levels nationally. Third, the more a public school is impacted by the loss of scholarship students, the better it does with its own low-income students. Fourth, the scholarship actually helps the public education budget because it saves tax money – an estimated $57.9 million in 2012-13.

The scholarship is not an educational miracle. It’s simply an option that can work for some students but not all. The fact that it grants opportunities to economically disadvantaged students and those of color is something that gives hope to an old civil rights warrior like me. The truth is that none of us knows how to end this vicious cycle of generational poverty, but pulling the rug out from under these poor children is no way to begin.

The Rev. H.K. Matthews is a Panhandle civil rights leader. The city of Pensacola named a park in his honor in 2006.