Hostility toward vouchers misplaced

BY DOUG TUTHILL

A scholarship program for 69,000 of Florida’s poorest schoolchildren is being attacked, and their parents are angry. They want to know why anyone would want to kick their children out of schools where they are learning. Why, indeed.

In its recent editorial endorsing a lawsuit that attempts to shut down the 13-year-old Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, the Sun Sentinel seemed driven by the fear that more deserving children might be served. It described a new 2014 law as a “massive expansion” without noting the program is the only educational choice with a statewide cap and that cap was unchanged by the legislation. It reported, erroneously, that budget analysts forecast the program will show a deficit in five years when all the independent financial analyses show the opposite.

This hostility is misplaced. This year, the scholarship is serving 69,000 students in more than 1,500 private schools, including 19,687 in Broward and Miami-Dade counties. Their average household income is only 5 percent above poverty. More than two-thirds are black or Hispanic, more than half live with one parent. And state research shows they were the lowest academic performers from the public schools they left behind.

Encouragingly, six consecutive years of standardized testing show these students are now achieving the same academic gains as student of all income levels. We also know the public schools most impacted by these scholarships are themselves making healthy test score gains and that the program saves tax money that can be used to help traditional public school students.

For the most part, though, this lawsuit is not about whether these scholarship students are learning. It’s about power and control. The teachers’ union and school boards want to force as many students as possible to attend schools operated by school boards and staffed by unionized teachers. They can’t deny parental choice to affluent families, but they can block low-income students from accessing non-district schools if they can eliminate these scholarships. And that’s their goal — to deny equal opportunity to low-income children.

Nearly 1.5 million PreK-12 students in Florida last year chose a school other than the one assigned by their district — about 400,000 of them in privately operated schools. And yet the suit takes aim at the one option specifically designed to help children on free or reduced-price lunch. It’s shameful.

Thankfully, public education is moving away from its traditional one-size-fits-all approach and acknowledging that children with different needs require different learning options. The tax credit scholarship is one such option, and it partners with traditional public schools to give underprivileged children a choice their parents could not otherwise afford. I’m proud of the role this scholarship program plays in promoting equal opportunity, and the Sun Sentinel should be also.

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