

Miami Herald

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2014 | \$2.00 | FINAL EDITION | MIAMIHERALD.COM

H1

Tax-credit scholarships are working

BY MARLENE DESDUNES
www.stepupforstudents.org

One of teaching's greatest rewards is the child who rises above the burdens that life has imposed and uses education as the ladder to a better life. But my union and my employer are trying to shut down a scholarship that's helping 69,000 of Florida's most disadvantaged children.



DESDUNES

As a classroom teacher, all I can see is spite. The teachers I know celebrate learning no matter where it occurs, especially for children who struggle to break the vicious cycle of family poverty. But the lawsuit that the Florida Education Association and Florida School Boards Association filed in August against the Tax Credit Scholarship is not really focused on whether these students are learning. It's about forcing them to return to a district-operated school, which strikes me as antithetical to our values.

It also tears me in half. I'm a proud first-grade

teacher and union steward in one of the largest and most progressive school districts in the nation — Miami-Dade — which won the prestigious Broad Prize for Urban Education and is a leader in educational choice. Roughly 140,000 students in the county choose from a broad array of school options because we believe their parents are in a better position to find the school that works best for them.

And yet I'm also a mother with a daughter who has blossomed academically at St. Mary's Cathedral School in Miami, using the very learning option that this lawsuit seeks to abolish.

The public campaign against this scholarship has relied too much on disinformation. In fact, when the FEA announced the lawsuit, vice president Joanne McCall described the program as "a risky experiment that gambles taxpayers' money and children's lives."

That doesn't square with the program's 13-year track record or the education I have seen my daughter receive.

That record shows that scholarship students were struggling in their public



schools and are now achieving the same academic growth as students of all income levels across the nation. Repeated financial studies show the program is actually saving tax money that can help

district schools. One academic study found that district schools most affected by the scholarship are themselves making solid academic gains.

These scholarship children come from homes

where the average income is only 5 percent above poverty. More than two-thirds are black or Hispanic, and the majority live with only one parent.

How could we, in the name of teaching, uproot these children from schools that are working for them? No one asked me whether my \$837 in annual union dues could be used to try to throw my daughter out of St. Mary's, and this court fight is turning school and union leaders whom I admire into politicians that I hardly recognize.

In Miami-Dade, more than 18,000 students use the scholarship, and yet when some of the parents showed up at a recent School Board meeting to protest the lawsuit, the board voted not to even hear what they had to say. That's a degree of callous indifference to poor parents of color that I don't ever remember seeing from the School Board. Do children in our community not matter unless they attend a district-operated school?

My union has not done much better. McCall, who is a smart and passionate educator, keeps talking in press conferences about how the union stands be-

hind "all" students and how "children are our most precious resource." Her words, undoubtedly, are well-meaning, but they are painfully tone deaf to the 69,000 underprivileged students — and their parents — who we have now pushed into a state of panic.

Those of us who spend our lives trying to give every child the best education possible understand that not every school works for every student. I have three children of my own who are all attending high-quality schools, and one goes to a Miami-Dade district school, another uses a McKay Scholarship for special needs and the third is on the Tax Credit Scholarship.

Education is breaking away from the traditional one-size-fits-all model, and Miami-Dade is a leader. The point is to empower parents and children, not the institutions. That's why this fight is so hard to stomach.

Marlene Desdunes is a teacher and union steward at Biscayne Elementary School and one of 15 parents who have intervened in court to fight the scholarship lawsuit.