Voucher policy a win-win

A few months back, I received dozens of emails (along with my fellow board members) from parents in Sarasota County begging the Sarasota County School Board to oppose the Florida School Board Association’s lawsuit against the Tax Credit Scholarships Program in Florida.

As a member of the Sarasota County School Board, with the responsibility of representing those parents and others, I reached out to a number of the families who had emailed us to listen and learn more. I was moved by so many of their stories and what the opportunities provided by the scholarship program had meant to them, their family and, most importantly, their children.

I grew up in a middle-class family, where I attended both public and private schools. My parents had the choice to send me to either, since we were fortunate enough to afford the option. My family had to make financial sacrifices to pay for our private education, but it was within our means.

So many of the family members I spoke with shared stories about how this scholarship program gave them hope that their children would have opportunities beyond what they had. It empowered them to know that they, as the parents, were in charge of the future of their children. They were no longer helpless. This is critical, because neither I nor my colleagues know what is best for every child. Parents do.

I am reminded of those individual families every time I hear critics of the scholarship program. When the media questioned me about my support of vouchers for low-income families, I stood my ground in the belief that parents must have the ability to choose what kind of education is best for their children. I also challenged every reporter who discussed this “controversial issue” to reach out to one of the families and report on how this program has impacted their lives. It’s a powerful story that should be covered.

Nearly 70,000 Florida students, including 567 in Sarasota County, benefit from the program. Each of these students qualifies for free- or reduced-price lunch. Two-thirds are black or Hispanic. In a National Bureau of Economic Research paper, “Com-