

Tampa Bay Times

FLORIDA'S BEST NEWSPAPER

 tampabay.com

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 16, 2014 | \$1

School options spur student achievement

More than 30 years ago, parents in Pinellas County showed up at meetings to protest a new school choice program. Schools said they couldn't compete with it. Critics raised fears of cherry-picking the academically and athletically talented students. But in the end, the program got a green light. Now it's such a vital piece of the school system, parents would fight to keep it.

The fight back then was over the International Baccalaureate program at St. Petersburg High, the first IB in Florida. It became a bona fide star in the Pinellas school system and helped usher school choice into the district. I bring it up now because of the school choice concerns with Florida's tax credit scholarship program.

Lawmakers want to modestly expand the program, which now serves about 60,000 low-income children in 1,425 private schools across the state. The teachers' unions, the PTA, and the *Tampa Bay Times* editorial board object. I know there is some controversy, and I know there are some issues like testing where people can respectfully disagree. But I also know the program works for most of the struggling children who choose it, and, like IB and so many other choice schools, is an asset to public education.

I know because I've been an educator for 44 years, 39 of those years in public schools. I know because I witnessed that IB controversy. And I know because I am now the lead administrator at St. Petersburg Christian School, where some of our 450 students in grades K-8 are on scholarship. They represent less than 20 percent of our school population but are involved in 100 percent of the academic and athletic curriculum.

Like the IB program, the tax credit scholarship program is needed because of something we all know: Different children have different needs. We're now comfortable with the IB program at St. Petersburg High because we've accepted the fact that high-performing students need more options to reach their full potential. It's only a matter of time before we fully realize the same is true for the students who struggle. In fact, in all probability, they're the ones who need the most options.

The scholarship parents who come to us are desperate for something different for their kids. And for many of them, what we offer works. Some benefit from smaller class sizes; some from the flexibility that we can shift gears on curricu-



STEVE KNELLINGER

ulum; some from an atmosphere that has fewer discipline disruptions and less bullying. Some also come here because of the religious component. (St. Petersburg Christian School is interdenominational.)

Some combination of what's different clicks. St. Petersburg Christian School is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as a National Blue Ribbon School because of its academic excellence and school support of all students. Every year a high percentage of our graduating eighth graders move on to high schools with specialized academic programs, including Osceola Fundamental High School, the Center for Advanced Technologies at Lakewood High, the finance program at Northeast, and, of course, the IB at St. Petersburg High, just to name a few. The others choose top-notch private Christian schools.

Most of them move on to public schools.

I can't emphasize that last fact enough. We view public schools in Pinellas County as partners, not adversaries. We believe we are helping them, and they are helping us. If students want to attend a traditional neighborhood public school, or a fundamental school, or a magnet school, because that's where they're most likely to find success, why not? At the same time, if students who are not successful in public schools can find success at a private school like ours, why not?

Every day, recognition grows among parents and educators alike that not every school is right for every student. That's why, just a few years ago, the Pinellas school district vastly expanded its school choice options, adding an IB program to Largo High, the ISTEM program to Countryside High and many more. That's why, just a few weeks ago, the school board voted to open two new elementary schools as technology magnets.

The tax credit scholarship program is just one item on this growing list of options. It's not the end-all, be-all, but ask parents who have scholarships what they think. If they find a school that does not meet their students' needs, they can move to another school that does. If we are truly focused on what's in the best interest of our most vulnerable children, those whose families struggle with economic and financial challenges, there's no doubt the program is a piece of the puzzle.

Steve Knellinger is lead administrator at St. Petersburg Christian School. He wrote this exclusively for the Tampa Bay Times.

Like the International Baccalaureate program at St. Petersburg High, the tax credit scholarship program is needed because of something we all know: Different children have different needs.