Expanding school vouchers is right move

Scholarship program gives poor families more options

The most significant expansion of Florida's scholarships for low-income children came in 2010, and the bipartisan spirit was so strong I was allowed as Democratic leader to make the closing argument in a Senate controlled by Republicans.

We found common ground because the Tax Credit Scholarship Program is focused on economically disadvantaged students in a way that strengthens public education.

So it is a considerable disappointment to see the partisan fractures this year, as the Legislature considers more modest improvements. And it is hard to miss the extent to which the Florida Education Association is driving the wedge.

But it is wrong to cast a $4.880 scholarship for 60,000 underprivileged children as an attack on public education. It is, to quote public educator and former House Education Policy Council ranking Democrat Bill Heller, “in the greatest tradition of our collective commitment to equal educational opportunity.”

With 12 years under our belt, we know a great deal about how this scholarship works.

The program serves children whose household income is only 9 percent above poverty. More than two-thirds of them are black or Hispanic. These children struggled academically in the public schools they left. Most importantly, their annual standardized test scores have shown they are consistently achieving the same gains in reading and math as students of all income levels nationally.

Whether these students should take the state, rather than national, test is a fair question. But let’s not pretend as though we have no measure for how well they are performing. We know how scholarship kids are doing at individual private schools, as the schools must report their learning gains if they have a minimum number of scholarship recipients.

Let’s also call an end to the deceit that this program hurts public schools financially, and that “money used for vouchers is taken away from basic public school needs,” as syndicated columnist Paula Dockery stated in her recent column in FLORIDA TODAY.

Five independent groups, including the respected Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability, have examined the financial impact of the program over the years, and all of them have reached the same conclusion: The scholarship saves tax money that can be used to enhance funding for traditional schools. The most recent report, by the Consensus Revenue Estimating Conference, put the savings in 2012-13 at $57.9 million.

Why, then, would opponents continue to claim these children are stealing dollars from public schools?

Even as the current scholarship bill has been shed of any cap increase and a new sales tax credit, the legislative fight has taken a combative turn. There have been allegations that the scholarship nonprofit, Step Up For Students, made up numbers about student demand—even as enrollment has tripled in six years and student applications for the fall are running 19,000 ahead of last year.

There also has been an amusing attempt to discredit the nonprofit’s president because he dared say the obvious—that one way to combat FEA control over Democrats on this issue is to fight campaign money with campaign money. Anyone who doesn’t think the FEA uses its considerable clout and campaign money to influence Democrats is sadly out of touch.

My former Senate colleague in this fight, Republican Paula Dockery, said in her column she is worried the scholarships harm public education. However, I’ve never seen that. I see a program that gives learning options to some of our most desperate parents. These parents aren’t against public schools. Their children are struggling, and they’re just looking for a place where they might blossom, and are so grateful when that happens.

I have little tolerance for those who try to cast these parents as villains in public education. Education is a not a zero-sum game, and this scholarship is simply about giving poor families more options.

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