

Miami Herald

MONDAY, APRIL 21, 2014 | \$1.00 | FINAL EDITION | MIAMIHERALD.COM

THE READERS' FORUM

Tax-credit scholarships strengthen public education

In a packed state legislative committee room recently, a parent who worked 12 straight hours and then drove two more to Tallahassee walked rapidly to the lectern without having filled out a speaker's card. She was nearly breathless.

"When my son took the FCAT in third grade, he was doing horrible," said Chanae Jackson-Baker, a former district School Advisory Council member. "He was doing horrible because he had auditory processing disorder. He left public school reading at third-grade, four-month level in sixth grade. He's now in seventh grade and he's on level. I never thought I'd see my son read a book."

Her story is remarkable not just because her son thrived at a pri-

ivate school on a Florida Tax Credit Scholarship. Parents of many students in traditional public schools, after all, have experienced similar success. What is important here is that a single mother with limited financial means was able to find a school that worked for her son because Florida has her back.

The Tax Credit Scholarship, now in its 12th year, is an education option aimed solely at children who endure economic disadvantage. This year, the scholarship is serving 59,765 students in 1,425 private schools. Two-thirds of the students are black or Hispanic, more than half are from single-parent homes, and state research shows us they were the lowest performers in the district schools

they left behind.

Unfortunately, some people are opposing a modest program expansion this year because they erroneously think that helping Jackson-Baker's son hurts someone else's son. That is simply not true.

Five different independent and state agencies have examined the program's financial impact and all have found that the scholarship, which costs \$4,880 this year, saves tax money that can be used to help traditional district schools. Florida's public education landscape is changing dramatically, as students, parents and teachers embrace an increasingly diverse array of learning options. Last year, 1.5 million Florida students in pre-K through 12 — or roughly 42 percent — chose something other

than their assigned district school.

These parents are not trying to hurt anyone. They are simply matching their child with the school that fits best, be it a magnet, career academy, charter, International Baccalaureate program, online course, dual college enrollment or scholarship school.

Because these options help children, they strengthen public education, as does a scholarship that gives financially struggling parents access to more options. When we help Jackson-Baker access the right school for her son, we help public education fulfill one of its most solemn covenants — the promise of equal opportunity.

— Doug Tuthill, president, Step Up For Students, Jacksonville