A scholarship that provides opportunity — and hope — to families

BY MONIQUE COMER
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I have nothing against public schools. I would love to send my children to great ones, but that’s not really an option for me. I feel stuck. My kids are stuck in failing schools, and there’s no easy way to get them out.

I hear a lot talk from those who don’t like the idea of expanding the tax-credit scholarship program. They say it is an attack on the public school system. They say it hurts public schools. Well, let me tell you what hurts my family.

My son, the older of my two kids, goes to a Pinellas County middle school with a ‘D’ rating. It probably would have been an ‘F’ school, except it benefited from a “one letter grade protection” law.

My daughter attends an elementary school here, which is also a ‘D’ school that should have been given an F. As a single mother of two children making less than $25,000 per year, I might qualify for some options to get them out of those schools, but all of the options seem out of reach right now.

Waiting lists for the tax-credit scholarship are long. And even though I didn’t apply last year, I have a feeling I would have been among the tens of thousands of parents whose students didn’t get accepted. Waiting lists at two fundamental schools also are long, but even if I could get my kids into those schools, I would still be stuck because I can’t afford transportation to get them to the other end of the county.

So when people talk about how these scholarships hurt public schools, all I can think of is how failing public schools are hurting my kids.

I know it’s hard to turn schools around, but if there’s a way to give more low-income kids at low-performing public schools a chance to get a better education, we should be doing that. Our constitution says the state is required “to make adequate provision for the education of all children” in Florida.

If the state can’t provide an adequate education by fixing my kids’ schools, or other schools like them, then expanding the tax-credit scholarship is a way to provide a good education for more kids than they’re serving now.

Parents certainly have a responsibility. As PTA president at one school and PTA treasurer at the other, I am heavily involved with my children and their schools. I make sure my kids are on top of their homework. But parents can’t do it all, not even those who are involved in their children’s education. We need good schools and great teachers to help our kids reach their potential.

My kids are pulling good grades at these schools, and I’m proud of that, but at the same time I wonder if they’re being short-changed. I wonder how they would do, how much more they might learn, if they were at a better school.

Our lawmakers in Tallahassee should stay focused on helping the students, not just protecting failing schools.

On a regular basis, I talk to my kids about the importance of doing their best in school. But it’s more than just making it to college and getting a good job. Getting a good foundation in these early years of life will give them the kind of confidence that comes from knowing something — the kind of confidence that comes from knowing you can learn. It opens up doors to more opportunities in every aspect of life.

So when politicians limit choices for kids like mine and force kids to struggle in failing public schools, it really does hurt me and my kids. It hurts all the kids who are being denied opportunities to flourish and thrive. And it hurts our state.

The tax-credit scholarship program gives parents and children hope; it gives them options to explore different types of schools. Expanding the program means fewer parents like me will have to feel stuck in a bad situation, and more kids will be able to get out of failing schools and change the direction of their lives.

Monique Comer has two children attending Pinellas County public schools and is a member of StudentsFirst Florida.