

# CONTEXT FLORIDA

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## A school that works for one child may not work for another

The students who enroll at the school I founded in southeast Jacksonville in 1988 come for many different reasons, but a good number come after struggling elsewhere.

Some got lost in schools that were too big, or didn't fit in schools that were too cliquish. Some didn't take full advantage of their opportunities and needed another chance. Some, along with their parents, got overwhelmed by the turbulent turns that life can take. So we accept them, knowing they are different, knowing we will have to find different ways to reach them and help them succeed. More to the current political point, we also accept those who use a state scholarship for economically disadvantaged students. It's built on essentially the same educational idea — that sometimes kids just need a different setting, a different approach.

Nearly 100 of the 280 students at our school, The Foundation Academy, are able to attend because they use a tax credit scholarship. The scholarship program is available only to low-income students. This year, it's helping about 60,000 students in private schools around Florida, including 4,620 students in Duval County. It gives them a scholarship worth \$4,880, which is about half what taxpayers would pay for that student to attend a district school.

The Florida Legislature is considering a bill that would expand the program so more families can participate. I think that's good. I see it as a way to show respect for parents, and to acknowledge that the people who know their children the best and love them the most should have a say in deciding where they go to school.

I also see it as a vehicle for equity and social justice in America, which is the reason I became an educator nearly 40 years ago.

I know people have questions about this, and some of them are fair questions. But I also hear a lot of myths. I want us to separate fact from fiction so we can focus on that basic truth: Different students learn in different ways.

A school that works for one child may not work for another. That doesn't mean the one school is better than the other. It just means it is different, and for some children, different may be better.

Our school is different. We have classes for boys, and

classes for girls. We separate our students into classes that serve two grade levels at a time. We do hands-on, project-based learning.

Just like our students, our school defies labels. We're accredited by the National Independent Private Schools Association and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Our curriculum is college preparatory. We do Bible study every morning. We offer Tai Chi.

We have an artist who lives and works on campus and helps teach. We have a Three R's class where students recycle, repair and reuse old furniture and other items. What they learn is that there is often something valuable in what some have overlooked and others consider worthless.

As I said before, I became an educator because I wanted to promote equity and justice. I cannot think of a better way to promote those things than through school choice. I support McKay scholarships for students with disabilities. I support home schooling. I support open enrollment, which the Duval County School Board recently considered.

I know that the more choices we offer, the more opportunities there are for children to succeed. Only in the diversity that is offered by all of these choices, public and private, can we possibly meet the endlessly diverse needs of all our children.

And so I support the tax credit scholarships, too. They equalize the playing field economically and allow parents who don't have a lot of money to do what wealthier families often do. That is, help them find a school that is different and, for their child, better.

*Nadia Hionides is principal of The Foundation Academy in Jacksonville.*