

THE DAYTONA BEACH
NEWS-JOURNAL

NEWS-JOURNALONLINE.COM

HOME OF THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS BEACH

SUNDAY

APRIL 27, 2014

COASTAL EDITION \$1.50

COMMUNITY VOICES

Vouchers build a future for kids

I wouldn't use the word "poor" to describe our family. The fact that my children have been able to benefit from the state's Tax Credit Scholarship program is a blessing. We are not "poor;" we're thankful.

My oldest son is currently on the President's List at Florida State College in Jacksonville.



**FAITH
MANUEL**

He's majoring in education and wishes to return the blessing of his education to the state of Florida as an educator.

For me, a single mom, the scholarship is not a political statement. It's not a criticism of Volusia County public schools, where my other son is doing quite well. It has nothing to do with public vs. private.

The scholarship just gives me another school option, and it worked big-time for Davion, my college student who was born when I was 15. It is putting my middle-school daughter on the same path.

So, as a parent who read The Daytona Beach News-Journal's front-page story April 20 about this program, I was left to wonder: Why must this be controversial? When an attorney for the Florida Education Association calls the Tax Credit Scholarship "a money-laundering scheme" and questions whether the program should exist at all, it leads me to wonder if his real motivation is education at all. Why would anyone attack and demean a program that has been so beneficial to

so many families? To me, it's not so much about if students are educated via private or public education. What's most important is that they are being educated. They are being trained and groomed, and in the case of my children (and the many other children we've encountered these past seven years), they are becoming great citizens who give back to this community.

The scholarship has been around since 2002 and is only for children who come from households like mine, where what I earn makes my children eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. The scholarship itself is only \$4,880 this year, and I had to dig into my pocket to make up the rest of the tuition when Davion was at Calvary Christian Academy in Ormond Beach.

Davion and Faith both have had to take standardized tests every year, or they would have lost their scholarships. They took the Stanford Achievement Test and, like all scholarship students, their scores were sent to the state to be analyzed. Every year a report comes out, and the state says these students are keeping pace with students all across the country — even students with higher incomes.

So from where I sit, the students are getting an education that comes at a pretty steep discount to the state, their tests show they're doing well, and the program is so popular parents last year had to sign up by June or have no chance to get in. And that's with 60,000 scholarships that were available.

Why, then, would the Volusia school superintendent say it "diverts money" when in fact the scholarship is spent to educate my son and daughter right here in our county?

Davion didn't switch to the scholarship until he reached sixth grade, and my main concern was keeping him focused on academics. Our neighborhood middle school just seemed like it had too many distractions. Calvary Christian was smaller and felt like family from the first day we arrived. The point to me was not really that Calvary was better, but that it fit Davion like a glove.

These kinds of school choices are all around us now, with magnet programs and charter schools and online courses, and that means we parents can shop around for what works best. I'm not naïve about politics, and I know that school districts want to make sure that as many students as possible are educated in the schools they run. I certainly respect that.

I hope, though, that the respect is mutual, and that the people who represent me at the School Board or the state Legislature recognize that when they insult a program that serves some of the state's most vulnerable students, they are insulting people like me as well. Davion is now planning to get his bachelor's degree at the University of North Florida and wants to become a teacher, and I couldn't be more proud. That's something we should celebrate, not demean.

Manuel lives in Ormond Beach.