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## Vouchers give poor students more options for a better education

By Daphne Campbell

Florida offers a scholarship just for low-income children, and my party this year insisted that I vote against it.

Never mind that it gives these children some legitimate learning options. Never mind that the beneficiaries are mostly black or Hispanic and live barely above poverty. Never mind that I'm a Haitian-American nurse and lawmaker who represents a North Miami district that is almost 90-percent black and Hispanic.

My vote recently to strengthen Tax Credit Scholarships for these students was treated as an act of defiance by the state House Democratic Caucus. The whole episode makes me wonder: If not for these desperate underprivileged families, for whom does my party expect me to fight?

This scholarship is an alternative for the children who tend to struggle the most in education, and it is serving 59,765 students in 1,425 private schools this year. The news about the program is uniformly good: Their standardized scores show us they are achieving the same gains academically as students of all incomes nationally; the public schools most affected by the loss of students to the scholarship are themselves showing impressive academic gains; and the scholarship is small enough, \$4,880 this year, that it saves tax money that can be spent on traditional public schools.

In my own district, I have seen some of these schools turn around the lives of children who were headed in the wrong direction, and I proudly helped Ebenezer Christian Academy build a new facility that furthers its mission in the community.

None of this seemed to matter to the party this session. Nor did it matter that Democrats have routinely voted for the scholarship in the past, including nearly half the caucus for a major expansion in 2010. Instead, I was accused of being anti-public education. The reality is that I was parting ways with the Florida Education Association, which threatens Democrats with primary opponents if they support any school option that is not under the union's collective bargaining agreement.

This is most unfortunate, because parents don't care so much about who runs the school or whether the

teachers are union members. They're simply looking for options that work best for their own children and, in this environment, there is no conflict between public and private. A child can thrive in a neighborhood district school or a magnet school or a career academy or a charter school or a scholarship school. The point is to match the student with the classroom that works best.

Much of the political conflict that surrounds this debate is manufactured. At its core is the argument that private options harm public schools, a claim for which there is zero evidence. These options give parents more choices, and not all of them will choose the traditional district-operated school.

But a legislator who wants to help every child succeed doesn't need to pit one parent against another or one school against another. A student who leaves a district school for a charter school is no more harmful than one who leaves a charter school for a district school. We serve students, after all, not schools.

An increasing number of Democrats across this nation recognize that one size does not fit all. The nation's first African-American president is pushing to double the number of charter schools in this country. The new African-American U.S. senator from New Jersey, Cory Booker, stood up to teacher-union attacks over his support for vouchers for low-income children.

In our own state, Democratic Sen. Jeremy Ring voted for the scholarships, as well, and told his colleagues: "You know, to me, progressive means we change with the times. And changing with the times is being realistic of what we as parents have to face daily with our kids and these sorts of challenges."

Sen. Ring is right. I see the challenges these children face every day, and I have seen this scholarship make the difference between college and jail. I'm not arguing it is the right solution for every disadvantaged student, only that we owe them every option we can give them. That's also, in my judgment, a core value of the Democratic Party.

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