Scholarships broaden choice, don’t pit private against public

By Henry Fortier

The scholarship that has allowed Artayia Wesley to attend St. Andrew Catholic School in Orlando for the past four years has changed her academic life so much that she traveled to the State Capitol in March to share her success.

“Before, I was academically challenged,” she told a House committee. “I wasn’t the best student in the class, grade-wise. But as I went to St. Andrew, now I’m an A-B student and working to be on the honor roll.”

Her story doesn’t surprise me, knowing the kind of education delivered every day at St. Andrew, a U.S. Department of Education-certified Blue Ribbon School, and the 41 other schools in the Catholic Diocese of Orlando.

By the same token, I would never argue that Catholic schools are the right school for every child in America, which is why I don’t understand those who view tax-credit scholarships as a form of competition with traditional public schools.

The reality is that these schools are merely an option, and the scholarship is a tool for parental choice to assure that all students have an opportunity to attend a school that best fits their needs and unique learning style. Catholic schools educate non-Catholic students and serve the general public the same as government-run schools.

So for Orlando Sentinel columnist Scott Maxwell to use the occasion of some worthy scholarship legislation this year to dismiss this 12-year-old educational opportunity as “a farce” seems remarkably combative (“Like zombies, school vouchers rise from dead,” May 20).

It’s also rather coldly dismissive of the educational choices that financially struggling parents made for 59,765 students in Florida this year — 9,448 of whom chose Catholic schools. Are they not capable of making good decisions for their children?

The beauty of the Tax Credit Scholarship Program is that it further promotes educational variety. Different children learn in different ways, and last year parents of 1.5 million students in PreK-12 in Florida chose something other than their traditional district-operated neighborhood school.

Today’s public-education students enjoy an expanding menu of options, including open enrollment, magnet programs, career academies, online courses, International Baccalaureate, charter schools and scholarships for disabled students.

There is no reason to view any of these options as being in conflict with one another, or any of them as an attack on the traditional neighborhood school. We know from numerous independent financial evaluations on the tax-credit scholarships that they save tax money that can be used to enhance district schools. We know from academic research that the public schools most impacted by the loss of scholarship students are themselves achieving commendable test-score gains for low-income students.

While the private schools that participate in the scholarship don’t follow all the same rules and tests and grades as public schools, they are indeed held to account for how they spend their money and how well their students perform.

Every school with more than $250,000 in scholarships is required to submit an annual financial report by an independent accountant. Every scholarship student in grades three through 10 is required to take a nationally norm-referenced test approved by the state, and those scores are reported publicly every year statewide and for every school with at least 30 tested students.

Perhaps more important, though, any parent can choose on any day to remove a student from any one of the scholarship schools. Most of the scholarship parents are also paying out of pocket to cover the gap between the scholarship and tuition, and with paying parents, the accountability factor is high and constant if our schools are not meeting the needs of each family.

I have worked in schools in Baltimore City and New York City before being honored to lead schools here in Orlando, and I have found our educational culture to be the same. We exist to serve our community, and we share with our friends in district-operated schools the goal of putting every child on a path to success in life.

In this education world, there is no room for us versus them. It’s about recognizing the dignity of each child and the power of success in the betterment of his or her family and our world at large.

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