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Parents best at picking kids' schools — expand vouchers

BY JOY PULLMANN
Guest columnist

During the legislative battle this spring over expanding Florida's K-12 private scholarships, pundits and establishment types kept pretending school choice is not good for families.

"This legislation does nothing to ensure that the private schools that teach voucher students do their job," the Tampa Bay Times wrote in an editorial.

"We have no idea where those [voucher] children are and how they're doing," St. Johns County Superintendent Joseph Joyner told the St. Augustine Record.

"The idea of defunding our public schools and placing more money into private institutions with less accountability, poorer results and unapproved curriculum deserves nothing but a dunce cap," League of Women Voters of Florida President Deidre Macnab said.

In an email to its members, the Florida PTA called expanding school choice an "attack on our public schools."

Florida families finally have had a chance to start voicing their opinion: Just recently the largest number ever — 100,000 — applied for K-12 scholarships. Because families can apply until the end of June, that number likely will increase.

Unfortunately, there aren't enough scholarships to go around. It's likely tens of thousands of Florida children will go without a scholarship and have to return this fall to schools they want to leave.

This has happened for several years, despite legal provisions that increase the next year's capacity automatically when the scholarships are oversubscribed. After forecasting a "massive expansion" of the state's tax-credit scholarships, Florida House Speaker Will Weatherford and his colleagues managed only to increase the eligibility to middle-income families, rather than filling the shortage of opportunities for those already eligible.

Letting more people apply for school choice is nowhere near the same as creating space for those who apply. In the 2013-14 school year, there was enough money available only for 60,000 kids' scholarships, despite interest from about 94,000. Enrollment in the choice program has tripled in the past six years.



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The program is directly funded with private money — tax-deductible donations from businesses. Because the scholarships are worth far less than the average Florida per-pupil spending, they save taxpayers millions of dollars every year. Taxpayers would have to cough up nearly twice as much as the foregone tax revenue if children enrolled in the program went to public school instead. But the state caps the amount of deductions businesses can take, and donors can't deduct from their contributions to the state's largest tax pool (the sales tax). Lawmakers tried to address those barriers, but they failed. This prevents the number of scholarships from increasing quickly enough to meet the voracious demand for them.

Florida's situation is even more unusual when compared with school-choice programs in other states. The statewide voucher programs in Louisiana and Indiana, for example, are close to being oversubscribed. In both states, only one-third of private schools participate in the choice programs, reducing the number of seats available — not because of a lack of available funds, but a lack of schools willing to take them. Researchers have credited this to the number of intrusive regulations Louisiana and Indiana place on participating private schools, which further limits options for families.

Parents don't care about political debates. They care about their kids. And that instinctive motivation is what makes them — not pundits, lawmakers, advocacy groups, or anyone else — the best people to entrust with the right to choose their kids' schools. And their choices cultivate a better society.

Florida mother Chanae Jackson-Baker, whose children receive tax-credit scholarships, said it best: "I'm willing to battle in order to give my kids an education. We have to give our children choices. It didn't just inspire my children. When I saw that they could do anything, I saw that I can do anything. I graduated with my bachelor's [degree] in psychology this year. That's one thing I never thought I would be able to do."

That's something many more Floridians could do, if not for the education establishment's politically powerful opposition to choice.

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