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WEATHER

HIGH 85, LOW 68 Partly cloudy

and The Tampa Times

School choice puts parents in driver's seat, so why are they fighting?

BY JONEAST

Special to The Tampa Tribune

Eileen Segal is a gracious Florida PTA president who welcomed to her annual conference last summer a contingent of low-income parents who take advantage of a state scholarship for their children.

So she was speaking from the heart in a crowded House committee room last month when she said: "What you're doing here today is very sad; it hurts my heart. Parents should not fight against parents. We all need to work together because we all want the same thing for our children — the best-quality education."

Eileen is right, and yet she was part of a PTA group that had come to the Legislature to condemn the education-

al option that parents of 60,000 of the state's poorest students have chosen this year. The audience that day was crowded with scholarship parents and their children, who in some cases sat next to PTA parents who stood on the other political side.

The PTA is not alone in this regard. A group called Parents Across Florida has written rather viciously about how the Tax Credit Scholarship for low-income children should be abandoned, even arguing that "vouchers actually strip away parents' ultimate choice" and that parents want only neighborhood schools and "don't want to be forced to shop around." A group called Fund Education Now, which is led by three women who have played a constructive role in fighting for greater investment, has

called the legislative effort to expand the scholarship to more underprivileged children "shameless."

This jarring juxtaposition is hard to miss and harder to explain.

The general politics of school choice is relatively clear. Many of the established education groups reflexively oppose initiatives that are viewed as Republican priorities, which is why Democrats — even those who have supported help for low-income students in the past — are apt to run to the other corner. School boards see it as their mission to fight any program that reduces enrollment in the schools they operate, and the Florida Education Association continues to fight any option whose teachers are not represented by the union. But do parents really have to fight against

each other?

The factory-inspired model by which education was delivered for most of the 20th century is giving way to one that is more responsive to parents. Suppose your child has an aptitude in science. Most districts now operate magnets that focus on science, as do some charter schools.

This is no small change. Florida Department of Education data show that 1.5 million students in PreK-12 last year attended something other than the traditional neighborhood school. That's 42 of every 100 students, and the list of options is extensive — open enrollment, magnets, career academies, online courses, dual college enrollment, scholarships for the learning disabled and more. This year, one in 12 students is being taught

in a form of education — charter schools — that didn't even exist little more than a generation ago.

So why pick on the choice aimed at helping the most disadvantaged students? The scholarship pays only \$4,880 this year, which is much less than the state would spend if the student attends a district school. The students who have left traditional neighborhood schools for this scholarship are among those schools' poorest and worst academic achievers. The scholarship students are achieving solid gains on standardized tests, and so are the public schools most affected.

We know this transformation is putting some stress on our educational institutions, which explains the apprehensions of district superintendents or school board members.

But it is as if parent associations are similarly frozen in the past and won't acknowledge how much parents are empowered by these new decisions. The PTA, for example, adheres to a policy position that opposes any form of school voucher, even scholarships, for the least among us, that was adopted in 1998. That's three years before the tax credit scholarship became law.

Parents necessarily take public education personally, viewing it through the eyes of their own children's needs. Toward that end, school choice puts them in the driver's seat, which makes parent organizations a most peculiar adversary.

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