

Scholarships save money for public schools

Thanks to Florida's tax credit scholarship program, nearly 60,000 low-income students in grades K-12 attend 1,425 participating private schools, including 19 in Escambia County. That's 1,425 options those students would not have had otherwise. That's 1,425 options that are embracing the students who struggle the most.

So how jarring, then, to read a Florida teachers union leader saying "vouchers do not give parents real educational choice."

The piece by Joanne McCall, vice president of the Florida Education Association, (Viewpoint, "Vouchers don't offer a real choice in a child's education," March 23)



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took plenty of liberties with facts about the program and a bill that would strengthen and expand it. But more concerning were the notions that anchored it:

» That expanding choice for low-income students comes at the expense of district schools.

» That low-income parents don't know whether their schools are high quality.

Let's start with the indisputable: taxpayers pay about half as much per tax credit scholarship (\$4,880 this year)

as they do per pupil for public schools. Five independent groups looked into concerns of scholarship money being "siphoned" from public schools and all reached the same conclusion: not true. Rather than hurting public schools, the program saves money that can be invested in them.

McCall would also have readers believe the program exists in a regulatory Wild West. This is also not true. Scholarship students are required, by law, to take state-approved tests. The results are analyzed by a researcher whose work is highly regarded by all sides in the choice debate. The average gains or losses for schools with more than 30 tested students are posted publicly.

The evidence shows scholarship students were the lowest-performing students in the public schools they left behind — a finding at odds with McCall's suggestion that private schools are cherry picking. They're now making the same gains as students of all income levels nationally. Meanwhile, students in public schools most impacted by the scholarship are also making bigger gains.

The results should give critics pause. Nearly 70 percent of scholarship students are black or Hispanic. More than half live in single-parent households. Their average family income is nine percent above poverty. What's important is not where they find success, but that they find it, peri-

od. Nobody knows better than the parents. That's why they started scholarship applications for 94,000 students last year, and for nearly 80,000 so far this year. Scores of parents drove to the Capitol in Tallahassee to testify on behalf of the bill.

It's noteworthy McCall only mentions parents in passing. She dwells on whether the state knows if these schools are performing well, and how the state should hold them accountable. The truth is, parents hold these schools accountable. If the school is not doing right by their kids, they use the scholarship to find one that will. For too many worried parents in

public schools, that's not an option.

Fully 40 percent of Florida students are enrolled in something other than zoned schools. Options are exploding, from magnet and charter schools to online courses and career academies, because parents are demanding them. A small percentage of low-income parents are clamoring for scholarships because they want the opportunity to do what more affluent families do: find schools that work for their kids. Why would anybody want to stop them?

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