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## School vouchers make sense - and a difference

By JON EAST

A judge is being asked to shut down a scholarship program that serves 70,000 of Florida's poorest students — 300 of them in St. Johns — and their parents are owed a sober analysis.

Given the probing questions he asked at a hearing on Monday, Leon Circuit Judge George Reynolds seems equal to the task. The rest of us would do well to follow his lead.

First, the Tax Credit Scholarship is a private learning option for K-12 students with financial need, and it is different from a school voucher the Florida Supreme Court found unconstitutional in 2006. The scholarship is not tied to the academic performance of public schools, and is funded not by school district taxes but by tax-credited corporate contributions. It is also important to note — since some are suggesting the scholarship was a sneaky plan to circumvent the court — that the scholarship was passed into law in 2001. That's five years before the court acted.

Second, the judge raised legitimate questions about claims by Florida Education Association attorneys that the scholarship undermines public school funding, interjecting at one point: "You could do away with this program tomorrow morning and the budget for the school system might change not one iota." His skepticism is well-founded. Independent financial reviews say the scholarship actually saves money. The Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability concluded it saves \$1.44 for every \$1 lost through tax credits, and the Official Revenue Estimating Conference projected a savings of \$57.9 million in 2012-13.

Third, courts in other states have rejected similar challenges to tax credit scholarship programs. The Arizona Supreme Court, in fact, deemed a tax credit

scholarship program to be constitutional, while ruling that a voucher program was not, writing that "the tax credit is not an appropriation of public money." The New Hampshire Supreme Court reached the same conclusion in August. In 2011, the U.S. Supreme Court weighed in, denying standing to those challenging the Arizona scholarship. The high court ruled that a tax-credited contribution is not the same as a government expenditure.

At this point, Judge Reynolds is examining only whether the FEA and others have standing to bring their case. But for many, the more important point is whether the scholarship, now in its 13th year, is helping children.

To that end, the news is encouraging. This year, the average household income for a scholarship student is only 5 percent above poverty. More than two-thirds are black or Hispanic, more than half from single-parent households. State research shows they were the lowest academic performers from the public schools they left behind, and are now achieving the same gains on standardized tests each year as students of all incomes nationally. Academic research reveals that public schools most impacted by the loss of scholarship students are themselves making solid gains.

Leaving the legal debate aside, the evidence is telling us this scholarship is helping students who have historically struggled and, with that, it is making public education all the better.

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