Tax credit scholarship in Florida is a national model with bipartisan support

When I was President Clinton’s press secretary, I saw the power of bipartisan-ship. I now see an emerging bipartisan consensus on a critical issue: educational choice for low-income families.

I am chairman of the Children’s Scholarship Fund, a national nonprofit that provides privately-funded scholarships to poor parents, so they can send their children to the private school of their choice. We have affiliates in 25 cities, and have provided over $600 million in scholarships to 145,000 children.

Florida’s tax credit scholarship law, which gives companies credits for donations to scholarship programs, was created by the legislature in 2001. It was inspired by the four Florida CSF affiliates and has enabled CSF’s successor to help more than 400,000 Florida children find a school that works better for them.

Research shows that the program serves the poorest and poorest-performing children in the state’s public schools, and it shows the program improves the academic performance of the public schools. State’s budget analysts say it saves taxpayers money. The average household income of scholarship families is $24,000 for a household of four, and almost 80 percent are minorities.

Florida’s law is an inspiration for the rest of the country. There are now 12 states with similar laws. Most encouraging is the growing bipartisan support for these programs. Governor Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat, has proposed in his latest budget a tax credit scholarship based on the Florida model. The bill is supported by over a hundred diverse organizations, including the police and firefighter unions, and local chapters of the public employee unions SEIU and AFSCME.

With this growing bipartisan support for the Florida model, I was saddened to hear the Florida program is under legal assault. When I was in Washington almost 20 years ago, educational choice was largely a theory. It was easier for opponents to portray it as a threat to public education. But more choices for parents can create incentives for public schools to improve.

I confess to being mystified by the legal arguments raised against Florida’s program. Other states have not been bogged down with con-trived debates over the separation of church and state — a principle I heartily endorse and do not consider jeopardized by tax credits for scholarships, even at private, parochial schools. We allow tax deductions for contributions to all manner of charities, including those that are faith-based. Is this really an issue that the Florida Supreme Court would ultimately need to decide?

Hopefully it will not come to that. Our affiliates aspire to follow Florida’s path and empower more low income families with choice. It would be devastating to them to see their role model shut down. But nowhere near as devastating as it would be for the 70,000 low income children who would be evicted from their schools.

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