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Critics wrong about tax credit scholarships

By Joe Negron

None of us has found the secret path that leads all children from lives of poverty, but we know it begins with education. That's why a lawsuit against a 13-year-old scholarship serving 70,000 of Florida's poorest schoolchildren is misguided.

In her recent defense of the suit, Florida Education Association Vice President Joanne McCall wrote of the need to assure a strong curriculum in all neighborhood public schools as though there is dispute on that point. But her conclusion – that improvements to neighborhood schools will alone solve the problem of generational poverty – is unrealistic. It ignores the reality that different children learn in



State Sen. Joe Negron says goal was to expand options.

different ways, which is why 42 percent of PreK-12 students in Florida no longer attend their zoned neighborhood schools. Districts themselves are expanding these options.

More importantly, these options are not an affront to traditional neighborhood schools. A scholarship program for some poor children is no more a threat to traditional neighborhood schools than an International Baccalaureate (IB) program for some academically advanced students. As a lawmaker who proudly sponsored the bill creating

Florida Tax Credit Scholarships in 2001, I can assure you our goal was simply to expand learning options to children who traditionally have had the fewest.

The FEA consistently claims the program undermines education funding, writing in a court filing that the scholarship led to "hundreds of millions of dollars of reduced funding for public schools during the 2013-2014 school year alone." And yet the state's most authoritative oversight agency found that the program saves \$1.44 for every \$1 lost in tax credits, and its estimating conference more recently put the annual savings at \$58 million. These savings result from the fact that by law, the maximum scholarship per child is less than public school per pupil

The program does not hurt public school funding.

spending. If we eliminated the program as McCall wishes, the Legislature would have to cut other services or raise taxes. And rather than reducing public school funding, in the 2013-2014 school year the Legislature actually increased the K-12 appropriation by \$1.05 billion – that's 6.3 percent per student.

McCall also wrote "there's no conclusive evidence" the scholarships improve academic achievement. And yet for six years straight, the state's official researcher has reported that the

students who choose the scholarship are the lowest achievers in the schools they leave behind – and are now achieving the same standardized test gains in reading and math as students of all incomes nationally. Equally encouraging, independent research also shows that the program is spurring improvements in public school performance.

McCall claims that the program is funded by "public tax dollars." This is factually incorrect, and her mistake is a crucial legal point. The Florida Supreme Court struck down another program because the money was taken directly from funds appropriated by the Legislature for public schools. This program is funded by corporations choosing to make a charitable contribution to a not-for-prof-

it scholarship funding organization. The state then gives the corporations a credit when they file their state taxes. This is just one of more than 30 tax credits the Legislature has made available to corporations. In 2011, the U.S. Supreme Court rejected a challenge to an identical scholarship program in Arizona precisely because the justices did not consider the contributions to be government expenditures.

These are critical facts that McCall got wrong. But the most important point she is missing is that not every child will thrive in their assigned public school.

State Sen. Joe Negron represents District 32, which includes parts of Palm Beach, Martin, St. Lucie and Indian River counties.