Parents Benefit From School Choice

By ANDREA WIGGINS

Some parents have choices in their children’s education. They can afford different schools, they get lucky, they know how to finagle the system or — like me — they qualify for one of the programs in our state that gives families more options.

But what about the others?

You can’t always control where you live or the school your child is zoned to attend. Many students could benefit from a school in another district or a teacher in another classroom if given the chance, but these kids are plain out of luck.

I count myself as fortunate.

After being told I would never be able to have children, I ended up with five great kids, three of whom I adopted and have special needs.

I also never expected to be a single parent and face the financial challenges of piling medical bills and a housing crisis, but life is not without challenges. I would not trade my family for anything, and I am thankful to live in a state that provides some great school-choice offerings.

My 12-year-old daughter has had an especially tough road. Reactive attachment disorder, severe cognitive impairments, post-traumatic stress disorder, ADD and severe anxiety are among the challenges she faces. When I could afford it years ago, I enrolled her in a private school, Resurrection Catholic School, which offers the environment best suited to her unique needs. When our family finances took a big hit, I was so worried we would no longer be able to afford to keep her at Resurrection. Where would she go? Would she get the help she needed?

This fear was relieved thanks to Florida’s newest choice option, Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts.

Now my daughter is able to continue her education at Resurrection, and we’re seeing results. She can better communicate. She can put together thoughts and tell you what she thinks about a subject. These small steps are successes for her. The PLSA also has allowed us to add tutoring, education supplies, curriculum and therapy aids. It has been customizable and a blessing thanks to the educational options offered to them in Florida. This is why I feel compelled to speak up for the rest of Florida’s families.

Not only are there union-led lawsuits trying to shut these programs down, but there are other families who still need more options and cannot take advantage of existing school choice programs. Many families are missing out on quality options because school choice is lacking within

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to our family.

The PLSA is an “education account” if you will. It lets me decide what my daughter needs and where her state education dollars will follow her.

This year, her education dollars are following her to a school where she is thriving.

My youngest, in kindergarten, was diagnosed with abnormal fetal growth as an infant, affecting her speech. With the help of Florida’s McKay Scholarship Program for students with special needs, she also is attending Resurrection and is benefiting from the school’s speech therapy services.

For my other kids, I applied for Florida’s Tax Credit scholarship program. This program allows my limited-income family to send my other children to Resurrection. Given our large family and the unique needs of my children, sending my kids to the same school is a blessing.

Even with all my family has been through, I’m still hopeful for the futures of my children our traditional public school environment.

If a child’s needs aren’t being met, his or her parents will know, and they should be able to make a change — or, at the very least, be able to request a change.

Some schools are just a better fit for one reason or another, whether it’s a special program, an advanced curriculum, or a healthier peer group. And a parent can make that decision better than a zip code.

Florida families need more public school choice options, and I support the Legislature’s work to give families the ability to choose any school in the state, as long as it has the capacity to serve their child. Florida’s school choice options have allowed me to do what is best for each of my kids. I hope you will join me in asking our lawmakers to give more families this chance.

[Andrea Wiggins, a resident of Lakeland, is a single parent of five children utilizing school-choice options, and she has a degree in special education.]