Scholarships don’t hurt public schools

Throughout my public career — as a City Council member, state representative and secretary of the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice — I worked to help children follow a path to success in life and, in particular, to restore hope for young black men. That explains the Florida Council on the Social Status of Black Men and Boys, which I sponsored in 2006 as a legislator, and my strong support for public education as a linchpin for a child’s overall success.

The education facts are painfully clear. In Pinellas County last year, only 28 percent of black students read at grade level, and only 26 percent performed math at grade level. The latest Schott Foundation report is numbing, placing the graduation rate for black males in the county at 28 percent.

This is the kind of social crisis that should bring us all together, cause us to roll up our sleeves and pitch in to help. So it is good news that a circuit judge in Tallahassee recently tossed out a constitutional challenge to an education option that is helping 70,000 of Florida’s most underprivileged students — a disproportionate percentage of whom are black.

The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, which is helping 2,621 poor children mostly of color to attend 74 private schools in Pinellas this year, is not a substitute for the kind of great public schools that I have spent my life supporting. But it deserves a seat at the public education table, and let’s hope the legal challengers to this program will listen to what the judge has had to say.

From where I sit, this is not a competition, and this scholarship is not an attack on traditional public schools. The truth is that different students learn in different ways, and there is no reason we can’t offer them a range of learning options that includes magnet and fundamental schools, online courses, dual enrollment, charter schools — and even scholarships to private schools for those who can’t afford tuition.

Some of the children I know as a pastor in St. Petersburg suffer from a form of educational despair, and these scholarships also open the door to faith-based schools that help them read and write in part by lifting their spirit. These are community-based schools that know the lives of their children and families, and, together, have built a bond that can translate into academic achievement. Where there is trust and hope, there can be learning.

The numbers so far tell that story. This state scholarship program is entering its 14th year this fall, and the students live, on average, in households that are only 5 percent above poverty. Two-thirds are black or Hispanic, more than half live with a single parent, and test scores show they were the lowest performers in the schools they left behind. For six straight years, though, these same students have been achieving the same standardized test score gains in reading and math as students of all incomes across the nation.

This is not to suggest the scholarship is some type of educational panacea. It’s merely one tool that can help some children who can’t otherwise afford it. Modern public education is being strengthened by the choices we empower parents to make, and we should embrace learning wherever it may occur.

The judge who dismissed the lawsuit made an important point in doing so. He said no one had proved the scholarship is harmful to public schools. He’s right. The scholarship is a partner with public education, and it is just one more commitment we can make to children who desperately need our collective help.

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