School-choice scholarships save money that’s reinvested

BY JAMES B. HERZOG
Guest columnist

At St. Andrew Catholic School in Pine Hills, the teachers do not teach subjects. They teach students. As educators, they know there isn’t a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching, and they know every school isn’t right for every student.

That’s why we appreciate programs like the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship for low-income students and the McKay Scholarship for students with disabilities. Both are among a growing mix of options that give parents the ability to send their children to schools that work best for them.

It’s true, as the Orlando Sentinel has noted, that growing numbers of Florida parents participate in these school-choice programs. But this growth in educational opportunity and parental empowerment is a positive development. We know students benefit when their parents have more options. We know society benefits when more students succeed.

Across the state this year, 30,000 students are using McKay scholarships. Another 70,000 are using tax-credit scholarships, including 6,500 in Orange County. Two-thirds of the tax-credit students are black and Hispanic; their average family income is 5 percent above poverty; and the data show they were typically the lowest-performing students in public schools. Thanks to the scholarships, 1,500 private schools have rolled up their sleeves to help them, and the state-mandated academic analyses shows they are having a consistently positive impact.

St. Andrew and 185 other Catholic schools are proud to be among them. Across the Diocese of Orlando, of 12,664 students, 2,864 students use tax-credit scholarships and 813 use McKay scholarships. At St. Andrew, about 75 percent of the roughly 330 students in prekindergarten through eighth grade are using tax-credit scholarships, with a handful using McKay.

Each morning, they begin the day by reciting the following: “St. Andrew is a place where students are soaring academically, creatively and spiritually in order to be Disciples of Christ in the 21st century.” Clearly, the school is deeply committed to its students’ spiritual development. But this in no way conflicts with our calling to provide them with an education that is second to none.

This calling demands commitment to best practice. Like their counterparts in public schools, the teachers at St. Andrew are motivated not by money, but by the desire to see every student live up to his or her potential. Every teacher at St. Andrew is state-certified, with several having earned advanced degrees in their areas of instruction.

Each year, the students take the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, so the school can assess its performance. During the year, they’ve administered other assessments to ensure they are making adequate gains. The school also dedicates a great number of professional development hours to ensuring that classroom assessments advance student learning.

This focus on good teaching helped St. Andrew earn a distinguished National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence award from the U.S. Department of Education. But the school is not resting on its laurels. Beginning next year, it will partner with educators at the University of Notre Dame to bolster quality even more.

Test scores show St. Andrew students are consistently learning at a rate above the national average. And while some of them will continue in Catholic schools after graduation, many more will return to public schools. I can't stress the last fact enough, because it dispels the myth that we are in competition with public schools.

Fiscal-impact studies on the tax-credit scholarship program show it saves taxpayer money that can be reinvested in public schools. Meanwhile, other statistics show how much parental choice has become the new normal.

More than 40 percent of all prekindergarten-through-12th-grade students in Florida now attend something other than their zoned district school. Parents now routinely choose between neighborhood schools, magnet schools, charter schools, virtual schools, career academies, International Baccalaureate programs and other options.

In the big picture, private schools like St. Andrew, and the scholarships that allow disadvantaged students to attend them, are just one small piece of the puzzle. But it's a vital piece that makes the whole better. For all of us.

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