Scholarship program a success
Ruling keeps Florida low-income children in private schools

Last week Leon Circuit Judge George Reynolds dismissed a lawsuit threatening the private school scholarships of nearly 70,000 low-income children in Florida. I was heartened by the decision, as should all Floridians.

The judge ruled the teachers union and school boards association lacked “standing” — or the legal right — to sue the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship because their claim that private school scholarships harm public schools and students was merely “speculative.”

This decision is in line with my own opinion that this program is just one option for low-income children to choose from in our increasingly diverse menu of K-12 programs.

Teachers union officials have previously vowed to fight the case all the way to the Florida Supreme Court. I hope that they will reconsider that conviction and end their effort to evict 70,000 poor children from their schools.

School choice popular

Today, over one third of Florida children funded by the taxpayers to attend school in the K-12 years do not attend their assigned neighborhood school.

Students choose charter schools, magnet schools, IB programs, career academies, virtual schools, and even private schools with the help of scholarships like the McKay Scholarship Program for special needs children.

Commentary

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These scholarships serve the state's economically poorest and academically poorest children. More than 70 percent of these students are black or Hispanic, and more than half come from single-parent households.

The average child on scholarship lives in a household earning less than $25,000 per year. Studies of their test scores by Northwestern University show that the scholarship students are among the worst performers in their public schools when they leave. They then make solid progress in their newly chosen schools.

As encouraging, the Northwestern research shows that the program has improved the academic performance of the public schools as well.

That last fact is so encouraging to me because I am a strong supporter of the public schools. I have worked very hard to help our public schools not only through my positions in the Legislature, but also through private fundraising efforts.

Our public schools do heroic work under very difficult circumstances.

But I also know that not every school will be the right fit for every child. Low-income children need options like this scholarship program.

It would obviously bring terrible harm to these kids if they were evicted from schools that are working for them. But such an action would also be disastrous to Florida taxpayers.

Program helps state budget

As I'm sure the readers of this paper know, our Legislature is trying to create a budget that balances all the crucial needs of the state. One aspect of the scholarship program that is often forgotten is the benefit it brings to the state budget.

The scholarships educate students at a discount to the public school cost per student. If the program were ended, we would have to find tens of millions more in the budget to educate them.

Further, we would have to instantly find room in our increasingly crowded schools for 70,000 new students. Building new student spaces for them could cost well over a billion dollars.

It is my hope that the ruling by Judge Reynolds can enable us to put this lawsuit behind us, and work together to try to help low-income children reach their potential in whatever learning environment is best for them.

It is now up to the Florida Education Association and Florida School Boards Association to do the right thing and drop the suit.

Sen. Bill Galvano, R-Bradenton, represents District 26 in the Florida Senate.