School choices help to serve all Florida children

By Jon East

In a stirring eulogy last week in Charleston, S.C., President Obama reminded us of the historical significance of black churches and why to this day they also represent “places where children are loved and fed and kept out of harm’s way, and told that they are beautiful and smart, and taught that they matter.”

The president’s words also frame one dimension of a 14-year-old scholarship in Florida that opens educational doors to roughly 70,000 economically disadvantaged children who are mostly of color. The Tax Credit Scholarship is no panacea for those who grow up in poverty, but it does serve as an academic token that can transport them to different stops. Not surprisingly, some black parents choose schools run by ministers who view their children’s success as a calling.

This is not the public education of my generation. We went to the public school down the street, whether or not it suited us best, and the fact that so many parents can now choose something different can be jarring.

Broward County is a splendid example. Roughly 24,000 students choose district magnet and choice schools, 4,800 pick career academies, 2,700 select McKay Scholarships for special needs, 6,000 use tax credit scholarships. Remarkably, 41,000 students — roughly one of every seven — attend a charter school.

Most of these options didn’t exist a generation ago, and they strengthen education by recognizing that different children learn in different ways. Is an arts magnet better than a science magnet? Is International Baccalaureate better than a career academy? A zoned school better than a charter? The answer can be different for every child.

For some traditionalists, tax credit scholarships go a step too far. They help pay for tuition to otherwise private schools — including faith-based schools. The Florida Education Association, which represents teachers who by and large do heroic work, is even hoping to persuade the Florida Supreme Court to declare the program unconstitutional.

But that’s provincial thinking. These learning options need not be in conflict. One type of school is not necessarily better than another. They are simply different, and the parents who choose alternatives to the neighborhood public school are intending no offense.

Reassuringly, research shows us that the tax credit scholarship — which costs about 60 percent of the average public school student — saves tax money. It also tells us that the students who choose the scholarship are achieving the same gains on standardized tests as those of all incomes nationally, and that the low-income students who remain in public schools are making commendable gains themselves.

School choice is empowering parents of all races and financial means, but it is hard to ignore the president’s point about the least among us. These are children for whom the promise of equal opportunity is powerful, and we should celebrate us honorable progress that we extend them this extra helping hand.