‘I’m living proof’ that tax credit scholarships work

Yet, despite all the good it has done in Florida, the tax credit scholarship program is in jeopardy because of the Florida teachers union.

The union filed a lawsuit against the program a year ago last week, and it has decided to continue it even though a Tallahassee judge dismissed the case in May, saying it couldn’t prove the scholarship harms public schools.

The union’s appeal this summer means 78,000 low-income kids and their parents, including about 8,000 from the Tampa Bay area, will continue to be worried sick. They fear they will be kicked out of schools they love and sent back to schools where many of them were doing terribly.

I know how tragic that would be. By the time I was in fourth grade, I had been held back twice. My report cards were full of D’s and F’s, and I took out my frustration by fighting with other kids.

The truth is, I was destined to drop out.

But then, thanks to the scholarship, everything changed. When I reached sixth grade, my godmother enrolled me in a different school, a private school in Jacksonville called Espirit de Corps Center for Learning. She used the scholarship to pay tuition.

The atmosphere at my new school was unlike anything I had experienced before. I was expected to make honor roll, and everybody celebrated when, eventually, I did. People believed I could do it, so I started believing it, too. Learning became fun.

Knowledge became scholarships.

Scholarships

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a gift.

In the end, I became a good kind of statistic — the first in my immediate family to go to college, and the first to earn a bachelor’s degree.

Finding success has allowed me to give back. I recently worked as a paraprofessional at a public school, helping middle school students with mental and behavioral disorders. It was my responsibility to help them find the best way to learn, and I did this in part by utilizing skills I picked up from my teachers at Espirit de Corps.

It was an honor to pay it forward, to positively impact other students the way someone once did for me.

Like me, most of the students who use the scholarship are minorities who come from single-parent homes and tough neighborhoods. Like me, most of them were among the lowest-performing students in public schools. Test results show they’re making steady progress in their new schools. Other studies show the scholarships are not hurting public school students.

So why the controversy? Jo-anne McCall, the Florida teachers union president, has vowed to take the lawsuit all the way to the Florida Supreme Court. The union might have a legal right to continue fighting students and parents. But morally, it couldn’t be more wrong.

I don’t understand how anyone could object to giving disadvantaged kids more options so they are more likely to be successful. I also don’t understand why the union singled out tax credit scholarships. Florida has five different education programs that serve students in privately operated schools, but the tax credit program is the only one that exclusively serves low-income students.

Students in poverty need all the help they can get, and all tax credit scholarships do is offer them another helping hand. All across Florida, it’s giving low-income parents the opportunity to find schools that are a better fit for their children. I’m living proof that it works.

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