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Tax credit scholarships don't hurt public education

Gary Chartrand, current member and former chairman of the Florida Board of Education, has issued a dire warning for public education should the teacher union win a lawsuit to evict 78,000 low-income children from their private schools: Public schools can't afford that outcome.

Over the next five years, Florida public schools are already expected to grow by 100,000 students. "Imagine returning 78,000 scholarship students in one fell swoop," he wrote.

To absorb the sudden influx, Chartrand says school districts would need as much as \$2.6 billion to build new schools in a hurry. And because the tax credit scholarship is currently worth only 80 percent of what the state

pays districts per pupil, Chartrand estimates the state will need to spend another \$111 million a year indefinitely.

Those staggering costs aside, why would the union want to upset a program that works for so many underprivileged children?

The scholarship is just part of a broader school choice landscape in which 1.5 million pre-K-12 students last year attended schools other than their assigned neighborhood school. Nearly a half-million of those students attend schools that are privately operated, but the union only sued the one dedicated entirely to serving economically disadvantaged students.

"Given the academic success of these scholarship students, shut-

ting down the program also makes no educational sense," Chartrand concluded.

The scholarship is now 14 years old and serving some of the poorest students in the state. More than two-thirds are black or Hispanic; more than half live with one parent. The encouraging news is despite the fact that students choosing the scholarship were the lowest performers in their public schools, standardized test scores show they are now achieving the same gains in reading and math as students of all incomes nationally.

Those reassuring academic findings – and Chartrand's earnest warnings – were questioned in a recent column on these pages ("Make voucher program more accountable,"



Doug Tutthill notes the scholarships help the poorest among us.

Aug. 29). The author complained that most of the children attend faith-based schools, even though the U.S. Supreme Court has found no constitutional objection to such programs. This is probably why VPK, McKay and Bright Futures scholarships haven't been challenged despite being used at religious private schools too. The author complained the scholarship "drains precious public education funds," even though a half-dozen independent reports concluded the program actually

saves tax money that can help public schools.

To the recommendation that the scholarship be run by a "private charity," it already is. Step Up For Students is the state's largest tax credit scholarship organization. We take our job seriously, and Charity Navigator recently named us the nation's fifth best "top notch" charity based on financial accountability and transparency.

Like most charitable nonprofits, Step Up seeks contributions from Florida businesses. Thanks to the Florida Legislature, businesses contributing to the program receive dollar-for-dollar state tax credits.

The fact that donors receive tax credits for their contributions doesn't make Step Up any less of a private nonprofit

than Habitat for Humanity, whose donors also receive tax credits for contributions toward building homes for low-income families.

Instead of building houses, the contributions we receive are used to provide scholarships worth up to \$5,677 this year to students whose household income qualifies them for free or reduced-price lunch. The average household income this year is \$25,487 for a family of four.

This program works in harmony with public education, providing learning options to the least among us. It deserves all our support.

Doug Tutthill is president of Step Up for Students. He wrote this for The Palm Beach Post.