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HOT TOPIC FLORIDA SCHOOLS

Scholarships for low-income kids enrich education

By Doug Tuthill

Sixty-thousand of Florida's poorest school-children chose a private school this year with the help of a scholarship, and this 12-year-old program strengthens public education by expanding opportunity.

The program, called the Tax Credit Scholarship, is one learning option for low-income students who face the toughest obstacles, and is part of an expanding universe of educational choices that last year served 1.5 million – or 42 of every 100 – Florida students in PreK-12. Those who suggest scholarships for low-income children harm public education are wrong. The scholarships and the op-



Students deserve to have options, Doug Tuthill says.

portunities they provide strengthen public education.

The state's covenant is to children, not institutions, and these low-income students are being given options their families could not otherwise afford. That their chosen schools are not run by school districts makes them no different than charter schools or McKay Scholarship schools or university lab schools or online courses or dual college enrollment. That the state supports these

scholarships is no different than the state paying for these same students to attend a district school. These scholarships are publicly funded, publicly regulated, public education.

Why, then, would a Palm Beach Post columnist suggest that scholarships for low-income children come "at the expense of public education"?

Independent groups and state agencies have repeatedly concluded that these scholarships, worth \$4,880 this year, actually save the state money. The most recent projection came from the Consensus Revenue Estimating Conference, which placed the savings last year at \$57.9 million. While it is regrettably

true that district, charter and virtual schools have suffered financial cutbacks in recent years, they were not caused by these scholarships. In fact, this scholarship program was affected by those same cuts.

The bill the Legislature is considering this year helps reduce the waiting list for this scholarship. On average, scholarship students live only 9 percent above poverty, more than two-thirds are black or Hispanic, and more than half come from single-parent homes. State research also shows they were the lowest performers in the public schools they left behind.

These students are required to take a nationally norm-referenced test yearly, and the encourag-

ing news is that they have been achieving the same gains in reading and math as students of all income levels nationally.

The new world of customized public education is not a zero-sum game. A student who chooses an International Baccalaureate program is not hurting a student who picks a career academy. A student in a magnet school is not undermining students in her neighborhood school. We need to offer children options because they learn in different ways, and the response of parents has been overwhelming.

Chantae Jackson-Baker, a mother from Gainesville, drove to the Capitol last week to tell a House committee, "I'm willing to battle in order to give

my kids an education. I'm here to let people know, we have to give our children choices. Even with me, it didn't just inspire my children. When I saw that they could do anything, I saw that I can do anything. I graduated with my bachelor's in psychology this year. That's one thing I never thought I would be able to do."

These scholarships for low-income children exist to help public education fulfill a promise of equal opportunity. They deserve our support.

Doug Tuthill is president of the nonprofit Step Up for Children, which helps administer Florida's Tax Credit Scholarship for low-income students. He wrote this for The Palm Beach Post.