Facts needed for informed debate on school vouchers

By C.E. Glover

Since we opened Mount Bethel Christian Academy in 1990, we have worked with a steady stream of students who arrived in our classrooms academically behind. Many of them were in danger of falling through the cracks in school— and in life.

In recent years, many of them were able to come to us only because of Florida's tax credit scholarship program, which offers educational options to the low-income parents who need them the most. And, I'm happy to report, many of those students have gone on to excel not only at our school, but in other schools both public and private.

I bring this up in response to the Sun-Sentinel's editorial, “Make testing a part of state vouchers.” The suggestion that tax credit scholarship students should take the same standardized tests as public school students is worthy of serious public debate. All of us want to make sure that all students, whether they are in public school or private school or some other sector, are learning enough to succeed in a world that's getting more competitive and complicated by the second.

But the Sun-Sentinel omitted some important details about the scholarship program that are vital to having an informed debate.

To be clear, tax credit scholarship students are not exempt from accountability tests. Since 2006, they have been required, by state law, to take a state-approved standardized test. At our school, they take the widely respected Stanford Achievement Test. The results are sent to a top-notch education researcher for analysis and comparison to public school students. Since 2010, state law has also required the public disclosure of average test score gains or losses for private schools with 30 or more students in tested grades.

We know two important things from the test data. First, the students who use tax credit scholarships tend to be the lowest-performing students in the public schools. That finding is in sync with our experiences. Second, scholarship students are making the same annual learning gains as students of all income levels nationally. That should be encouraging to parents, taxpayers and policy makers.

It's worth noting that scholarship students are achieving these results with much less public funding than children in public schools. This year, the scholarship amount was $4,880. And though that's roughly half of total government spending on children in Florida public schools, it still comes with meaningful requirements for financial accountability.

State law passed in 2010 requires that private schools that receive more than $250,000 in scholarships must contract with an independent certified public accountant for an annual financial report. The law requires us to submit that report to the state for review. That's an appropriate safeguard to assure taxpayers that the money is properly spent.

I don't begrudge anyone for asking whether the current academic and financial accountability requirements are enough. Florida's education system is changing fast, not just with tax credit scholarships, but with vouchers, charter schools, virtual schools and all kinds of district options, too. It's a work in progress to determine the best way to balance what children need, what parents want and what taxpayers deserve.

At our school, we see the success stories every day, and we hear from the parents every day. Over the years, we expanded our school to accommodate more students because parents told us their children were thriving here. We know other schools are hearing similar things from other parents.

We wish readers could hear from our graduate who is now a math education major at the University of Central Florida. Or from one of our current 4-year-old kindergarten students who arrived here as a non-reader and is now reading on a first-grade level. Or from any of the other 95 scholarship students who go to school here. Each one has an amazing story, unique needs and the potential to grow up and change the world.

For their sake, all of us need to continue emphasizing the importance of education, and having thoughtful conversations about how to get it right for each and every child. For their sake, let's start by putting all the facts on the table.

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