Tax credit scholarship helps poor

One of the best things to happen to Florida public education in the past couple of decades is the realization that not every school works for every child. These days, parents can pick from neighborhood schools, magnets, career academies, online courses, gifted programs, charters and the like — choices that help them match their children with the schools that work best for them.

One of those options — the Tax Credit Scholarship — already serves 60,000 poor, minority and struggling schoolchildren. A bill proposed by House Speaker Will Weatherford this year would expand the option to another 6,000 students — out of roughly 2.7 million statewide.

The scholarship has been providing alternatives to underprivileged children for 12 years. The state's annual academic reports show that the students who choose the scholarship were the lowest achievers in the public schools they left behind and that scholarship students in general are now achieving the same standardized test score gains in reading and math as students of all incomes nationally.

The state has found that the $4,880 scholarship saves tax money that can be used to help traditional public schools. One report by the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability in 2010 found the state saved $1.44 for every $1 it lost through tax credits.

Low-income parents are lining up for this option for their children. This year, some 30,000 students started applications that could not be served because the scholarship, unlike other education choices, has a statewide cap on enrollment.

As a pastor in St. Petersburg who has worked with black parents and children who too often have lost hope in the educational system, I can tell you firsthand that this scholarship has helped to put many students on the right path.

It is by no means a cure-all, and the 1,400 participating private schools won't work for every student. But it certainly is one tool for parents who struggle with poverty and students who confront too many obstacles in their lives.

In recent years, the Tampa Bay Times has reported on the anguish that black parents in Pinellas County face. The achievement gap between the races in our county continues to be among the worst in Florida. Only 46 percent of black males earn a diploma, compared to 73 percent of white males. Only 28 percent of black students were reading at grade level last year, compared to 65 percent of white.

My allegiance is not to some institution. It's not to some quaint notion that public schools must serve all students as though they were computer chips in an assembly line, that only schools managed by school boards can have value in children's lives. To me, public education is our nation's compact with children, not with institutions, and our compact is to give every child the best chance to succeed in life.

In that context, I find it unnerving that people would reject an alternative for poor children because it doesn't fit a predetermined vision of what education must look like. The simple fact is that this scholarship program is helping some economically disadvantaged minority children while doing no harm to children who choose other educational paths.

The Rev. Robert Ward is pastor of Mount Moriah Missionary Baptist Church, director of Mount Moriah Christian Academy and education co-chairman of Faith and Action for Strength Together (FAST). He wrote this exclusively for the Tampa Bay Times.