Don’t make special students a ‘collateral casualty’

The Florida Education Association is trying to take a scholarship away from nearly 2,000 students with significant special needs, including my son Emmi, who has autism. Insultingly, its attorney has referred to us as a “collateral casualty.” If we are casualties, it’s because they are making it so.

Indeed, the FEA’s intent to destroy is broader than the new Personal Learning Scholarship Account (PLSA) for students with special needs, which was signed into law in June by Gov. Rick Scott as part of a bigger education bill. The teachers union also wants to dismantle another provision of that bill that expands income limits for a separate, 13-year-old scholarship that will serve roughly 67,000 low-income students this fall. In fact, it has been quite busy trying to demolish the educational options that benefit the most vulnerable students in Florida.

Of all the people to deprive, why this population?

In March, as lawmakers were considering bills to create the special needs scholarship, the FEA engaged in strident rhetoric, calling it “another scheme to commercialize education” and said it would “blow the doors off public education.” FEA vice president Joanne McCull, meanwhile, was testifying in committees against the PLSA bill, at one point calling it “a giant step backward.”

This is one reason I recently joined five other families in asking the court to allow us to intervene in the lawsuit. As a former public-school teacher, I take no personal pleasure in being in court on the other side of the state’s largest teacher union. But as a mother who sees this organization actively attempting to snatch away an educational lifeline from my son, I find this lawsuit to be outrageous. Exceptional students are different, not less; our children matter.

The PLSA is a godsend for parents like us, because it collectively gives us the power to provide an education that is tailored to the specific needs of our differently abled children.

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The PLSA will allow me to tailor my curriculum to his specific needs, supplement his schoolwork and provide recommended comprehensive treatment, including cognitive behavioral therapy, occupational therapy, applied behavioral analysis and individual as well as family therapy.

The state set aside enough money to serve roughly 1,800 students for the program’s first year, and in just two weeks the applications exceeded that number. That’s not surprising to me, a mom whose son has autism. I totally understand the desperation parents feel to provide an appropriate education for their children whose needs are so unique.

These are the kinds of education programs that can make a real difference for a vulnerable population of students, which is why this lawsuit is especially egregious.

Learning options — whether they be PLSAs for special needs students or Tax Credit Scholarships for low-income students or charter schools for all types of students — put parents in the driver’s seat, and no one has a greater desire to see our children succeed than us. To view us as an attack on public education is to demean that parents should have no say, to view the potential benefit to our children as irrelevant in the effort to remain in control, and ultimately to view our very children as a “collateral casualty” in that effort.

To me, learning options are very much a part of public education, and these territorial fights most hurt those who are already hurting the most.

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