Doug Tuthill is no stranger to educational policy. In the last 30 years he’s been working in education, Tuthill has been a classroom teacher and even headed a teachers union. He traveled on behalf of the nation’s largest teachers union, the National Education Association, to speak about the importance of school choice. Tuthill was even sent to Oxford in England to talk about teacher empowerment.

Tuthill currently heads Step Up For Students, a program that offers Tax Credit Scholarships to low-income students in grades K-12.

His background seems contradictory to some -- the pro-school-choice organization is often at odds with teachers unions, specifically about the tax credit scholarship program.

The National Education Association, the country’s largest teachers union, has openly opposed the program because it believes the voucher program diverts resources from public schools to private and religious schools.

Tuthill and supporters of Step Up for Students don’t feel the teachers unions’ opposition to the program is justified.

“I think that their opposition to a 21st century school system is short-sighted,” he said. “I don’t think the sort of one-size-fits-all that educators adopted out of the 19th century is the model that can carry to the 21st century.

But Tuthill provided a stark contrast to his colleagues, and he marched to the beat of a different drum when it came to ideas on teachers and the way they should move forward in education policy.

“I was clearly the most radical,” he told Sunshine State News. “I was the person who was always challenging the status quo. I was scaring people because I talked about empowering individual teachers. I talked about decentralized power.”

The bureaucracy of the teachers union didn’t particularly enjoy Tuthill’s “radical” views, but he never lost an election to his post because the majority of teachers, he said, supported his ideas.

“Rank-and-file teachers loved it,” he explained.

To Tuthill, the continuing theme in his involvement in education is to empower individuals, regardless of their position in education, whether they’re educators, students or parents.

Step Up for Students is just one branch of Tuthill’s goal to allow those involved in education the opportunity to empower themselves. This, he says, is the overlying goal that has motivated him in his various education posts throughout the years.

“To me, Step Up for Students is about my empowerment philosophy for these families to be able to match their child in a school that best meets their needs,” Tuthill said. “Just as I would advocate for teacher empowerment and the empowerment of individual teachers. As a pro-choice leader, I’m advocating for the empowerment of individual families.”

SUFS, a leader in Florida’s school choice movement, achieved significant victory during the 2014 legislative session when a bill to allow more students to qualify for the voucher program passed through the Senate and House and was later signed into law.

To Tuthill, it’s accomplishments like these that make the process rewarding -- and how those successes help the lives of students and parents.

“It’s really rewarding when you have these victories and you can help change people’s lives,” he said.