Leveling education playing field

Just a day after Martin Luther King Jr. Day, one of his sons spoke on behalf of Florida’s Tax Credit Scholarship Program to more than 10,000 demonstrators in Tallahassee.

The crowd, mostly minorities, had gathered to protest a teachers’ union lawsuit challenging the scholarships.

Martin Luther King III aptly captured the their sentiment: “… this is an issue of justice.”

The program empowers low-income parents to choose the school that best meets their children’s needs. It simply levels the education playing field for disadvantaged families.

In contrast, money, not those children’s welfare, is the focus of the Florida Education Association, which doesn’t want any funding going to private schools.

The union claims the program diverts money from public schools. But the scholarships actually provide less per student ($5,677) than what is spent per public school student ($7,097) — 80 percent. State law will cap that amount at 82 percent next year.

So the program isn’t draining money from public schools. It is allowing the state to educate more students on fewer dollars.

And the scholarship funding does not come directly from public funds. Under the Tax Credit Scholarship Program, companies receive a tax credit by contributing to the scholarship fund that parents may use for private schools. This is not a government-issued voucher. Companies voluntarily participate.

Parents, not government, decide whether their child is best served by a religious or secular private school. Claims that the program amounts to a state promotion of religion are false.

The program simply allows low-income families the same kind of education choices that wealthy families can exercise.

It serves about 78,000 students, hardly a threat to public schools, which have about 2.7 million.

Most parents prefer public schools, but some students simply do better in private schools, which may offer a more intimate atmosphere or specialized programs.

The Florida Legislature, it’s true, has sometimes treated public schools shabbily, acting as if private schools can do no wrong, while subjecting public schools to endless testing. State leaders now seem to recognize the interminable testing mandates are hurting schools and students.

But that is a different issue than the state’s support for a program that offers more education options to low-income students.

As King III told the crowd Tuesday: “It’s not an either-or. It should never have been framed that way. The question is, what is the best thing for the kids of our nation?”

No one can argue that providing the education choices made possible by the scholarships is not what is best for our schoolchildren.