

April 30, 2021

For parents, school choice scholarships are a dream come true

By Dr. Angela Kennedy



Dr. Angela Kennedy, CEO of Deeper Root Academy.

Florida school choice scholarships are a dream come true for hundreds of thousands of parents, including tens of thousands of families in the underserved population. Clear evidence shows scholarship students getting strong academic outcomes – and parental satisfaction through the roof.

So how disappointing to read the Capital Outlook column, “School Vouchers – A Parent’s Nightmare.” It uses a lot of emotional language to hype one myth after another, and then tries to stand reality on its head by suggesting the exception is the rule.

I sympathize with the parent mentioned in the column. We all know schools, public and private, that let students down. But it makes no sense to say scholarships and private schools as a whole are worthless just because of one bad experience with one institution. It is totally unfair to those of us – the vast majority of us – who are fully committed to helping all children realize their potential, and, with help from choice scholarships, are getting positive results.

I started my PreK-8 school, Deeper Root Academy, seven years ago, after 13 years as a teacher in Orange County public schools. I saw too many children falling through the cracks and on to the path of dropping out. I also saw teachers, like me, who could not help as much as we were capable of as the public school system is designed to serve the masses, which often does not allow for that personal touch. That does not mean that it does not happen in public schools, it is just more challenging. Our hands

were tied by one-size-fits all rules that may have been well-meaning but turned out to be counterproductive.

The scholarships that now serve 180,000 students in Florida give parents freedom. Instead of being forced to keep their children in schools that are not working for them – the norm for decades – parents can use the scholarships to find schools that do work.

The scholarships have been a dream come true for thousands of Florida educators, too. Thanks to these programs, we also have more freedom to choose schools – and some of us are using that freedom to create community-centered schools that we know work best for the students we know best.

At Deeper Root, our classes are smaller, on average 12 students per class. We use the same curriculum as Florida public schools, but our instruction is personalized, customized and infuses the theory practice of multiple intelligence. It works. Most of our students are from neighborhoods that would zone them for Title 1 schools, virtually all of them use choice scholarships, and many of them arrive a grade level or more behind. But now they are making strong gains and, having tasted success, are unstoppable. Many will go on to public high schools, where the knowledge and confidence they gained at Deeper Root will continue to propel them.

This success is the rule, not the exception.

The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, the biggest of the scholarship programs, now serves 100,000 students a year, two thirds of them Black and Hispanic with an average family income of \$28,000 a year. Years of research into the academic outcomes shows those students were the ones who struggled the most in public schools. But once on scholarship, they make steady progress – so much so that they’re now up to 43 percent more likely than their public school peers to enroll in four-year colleges, and up to 20 percent more likely to earn bachelor’s degrees.

None of this success comes at the expense of public schools. The scholarships are worth so much less than per-pupil funding in public schools – 59 cents on the dollar, in the case of the tax credit scholarship – which is why every study that looked at the financial impact found the scholarships are helping public schools, not hurting them.

Public education is complicated and no system is fool proof. But when parents, teachers and communities have real power through choice scholarships to shape schools to better reflect the diverse needs of our children, we all win.

Dr. Angela Kennedy is founder and CEO of Deeper Root Academy. She has an Ed.D in organizational leadership, a master’s degree in early childhood education and a bachelor’s of science in communicative disorders.