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## Diverse choices in education provide opportunity

By Denisha Merriweather



As the Black daughter of a 16-year-old mother raised in poverty in Jacksonville, I was delighted to see Jones High School create a great physics program. The school is an inspiration. But I was perplexed to see Jones' success used to disparage the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship – a program that turned my life

around.

In a recent Sentinel op-ed ("Jones success illustrates inadequacy of vouchers," May 16), former Polk County School Board member Billy Townsend perpetuates three myths about education choice in Florida.

### **Myth 1: Private-school scholarships have high dropout rates due to poor school quality.**

Urban Institute studies of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program found that scholarship students were more likely to attend and graduate from college than their peers who remained in public schools. Townsend ignores this success and instead points to a statistic in the studies -- from 2004 to 2010, 61 percent of recipients left their scholarship within two years, and 75 percent within three years. He claims this proves families' dissatisfaction with schools, which constitutes "an extraordinary record of failure."

That conclusion is not supported by surveys showing 90 percent of scholarship parents satisfied with their schools. Nor is it supported by the report's authors, who addressed this misreading on the Urban Institute's blog: "Our study finds positive effects on college enrollment and degree attainment, which makes it unlikely that broad dissatisfaction or dropping out is driving students to stop using the scholarship" (emphasis added).

### **Myth 2: Private schools create racial segregation**

Townsend bemoans 16 private schools in Polk that are 76 percent Black or higher. Those enrollments, of course, reflect parental choice. Meanwhile, 33 public schools in Polk County are 76 percent nonwhite or more. That reflects zoning and busing decisions made by the district. A higher proportion of Black students attend private schools on scholarship (30.4 percent) relative to the percentage of Black students in public schools (just 20.9 percent). Why do so many Black families leave district schools?

Perhaps because their children aren't learning. Black students in Polk perform worse than those in most of the other big districts in Florida, according to Florida Standards Assessment data from 2019. Barely a quarter of Black students in Polk read at grade level at the end of 10th grade. The only big Florida district where Black students perform

worse in 10th-grade reading? Pinellas – where the local newspaper won a Pulitzer Prize in 2016 reporting on the plight of those Black students and what it called "failure factories."

However, Black students in Miami-Dade finish in the top five, relative to their Black peers in the other big districts, in most grades. No big district in Florida has a higher concentration of low-income students attending private schools on scholarships than Miami-Dade. And no big district has made bigger academic gains over the past decade.

How could that be, if expanding educational choice is so destructive of "education capacity," as Townsend puts it?

The scholarship has also spawned the growth of Black-owned schools, founded with the purpose of serving Black students. Shouldn't all families, especially minority families, have access to an education environment that affirms their identity?

### **Myth 3: Scholarship programs harm public schools and make education worse in Florida.**

Townsend cites a Stanford study on Florida K12 achievement growth Florida as evidence that our embrace of education choice has dragged down public schools' academic performance.

Florida has low learning growth, but positive and above average scores, because The Stanford study starts five years after Florida began the A+ accountability plan, along with private school scholarships. During these years Florida's public education system saw massive achievement gains.

Accounting for Florida's majority-minority student population, our performance appears even better. Education Week ranks Florida third in the nation for K-12 achievement, and the state ranks No. 1, No. 1, No. 3 and No. 8 on the four core tests of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, once adjusted for demographics.

That strongly suggests that supporting diverse choices in education benefits all families, because it allows them to choose the school that best meets their needs – public or private.

I failed the third grade twice attending Duval County Public Schools. Not until sixth grade did I have the chance to attend a private school, thanks to the tax credit scholarship. I reached my academic potential and became the first in my family to earn a high school diploma and then a master's degree.

The scholarship gave to me, and others like me: opportunity.

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