

School choice is good for rural communities, too

By Ron Matus,



Bristol, Florida, is a town of 996 people on the edge of a national forest in a piney slice of the Sunshine State that has as many bears as people. Despite the myths, school choice is alive and well here.

Five years ago, a family of educators with 200 years of collective experience working in local public schools started a private school in Bristol. They didn't have any animus toward public schools. In fact, three members of the family had been district superintendents. They just knew that some students and families in this tight-knit community, the most rural county in the state, needed something different.

Thanks to school choice, Gold Star Private Academy was born. Every one of the roughly 20 students uses a state-funded school choice scholarship to pay for tuition. The school has been so successful that it just moved into a renovated funeral home that offers three times more space.

Like so many other myths about school choice, including allegations that it destroys traditional public schools, doesn't lead to better academic outcomes, and lacks accountability, the one about choice not working in rural areas is a phantom menace.

Bristol's success is a rebuke to this lie. In fact, Bristol is not the only rural community in Florida that has benefited from school choice. Highly regarded charter schools can be found from Florida's Forgotten Coast all the way to the edge of the Everglades. High-quality private schools have sprouted from the Apalachicola National Forest to the heart of Florida cattle country. In scores of small towns, resourceful parents are using education savings accounts to customize education for their children.

There are so many positive testimonials about choice in rural Florida that it's mind-boggling to hear choice opponents in Texas, Oklahoma, Iowa, and other states repeat the same,

contradictory claims: First, that school choice won't do any good for rural areas because there are so few options to give rural parents a choice, and second, that it will "kill" rural public schools.

Neither claim is true. In Florida's 30 rural counties last year, 8,500 students used education choice scholarships. Rural families appreciate choice every bit as much as urban and suburban families, if not more so, precisely because they have fewer options.

Choice allows more rural families to access the options that already exist. Better yet, even in rural areas, supply grows to meet demand. Over the past 20 years, the number of private schools in Florida's rural counties grew from 69 to 120.

Some, like Gold Star, serve students with special needs. Most primarily serve general education students. The result is a more pluralistic education system that strengthens rural communities and the families in them. Indeed, rural families in Florida couldn't be happier. The parents at Gold Star describe their school as a "total miracle" and "the greatest school on the face of the Earth." Some said that before Gold Star emerged, they were faced with a gut-wrenching decision: They could either uproot themselves from the small town they loved to access better learning options elsewhere, or they could stay and watch their children struggle.

School choice has helped all of Florida. It has put more students on the path to success, not only in choice schools but in traditional public schools as well. Choice and competition are big reasons why Florida's education system, which was a national joke in the 1990s, now ranks third among states in K-12 achievement.

But for those who fear choice will mean the end of Friday night lights and all the other good things that strong public schools bring to rural communities, here's a critical statistic: Over the past 10 years, after the most aggressive expansion of choice in America, the share of students in rural Florida enrolled in private schools rose a mere 2.4 percentage points, from 4.5% to 6.9%. This, even though more than 70% of Florida families are eligible for choice scholarships. If choice supporters were really out to kill rural public schools, they failed miserably.

The truth is, education choice in Florida is helping thousands of rural families access life-changing options for their children. At the same time, the overwhelming majority of rural families continue to choose district schools. Policymakers across America should proceed accordingly.