



# Parental choice works in education

By Catherine Durkin Robinson



When you give low-income parents more freedom to choose what's best for their kids, they choose wisely. So yes, it's worth it.

The Daily News recently reprinted a Gainesville Sun editorial (Monday, July 29, "Better oversight needed for voucher schools") that equated regulation of education with quality academic outcomes. It ignores the fact that parental choice is an effective form of accountability — and a vital tool to equalizing opportunity.

For too long, district schools had a monopoly on teaching most of the students within their jurisdiction, and parents had no choice but to send their children to whatever school that district assigned. Since parents had no options, the theory went, schools needed tight regulatory and accountability standards. That's the only way we'd know how they were working.

Those standards showed us that for millions of low-income, minority children, that system was not working.

School accountability should be a balance between regulations and family choice. And the evidence suggests Florida's tax scholarship program has found a good balance. Even with far less funding, the lower-income students using the scholarships are generating better academic results.

For choice critics, here are inconvenient truths: The scholarship in 2017-18 was worth 59 percent of per-pupil spending in district schools, according to Florida TaxWatch. Ten years of rigorous analysis of test scores shows scholarship students were typically the lowest-performing students in their prior public schools. And yet, those same students are 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, according to research by the respected Urban Institute.

Better outcomes at less cost. Funny how that's left out of every critical editorial.

The Daily News' editorial declared that parents using the tax credit scholarship (and the new Family Empowerment Scholarship) deserve to be better informed. To be sure, giving parents more and better information should be a priority. But the editorial questions the choices our parents are making.

As executive director of Florida Voices For Choices, the primary advocacy wing of Step Up For Students, I talk to parents and teachers every day who tell me the following:

- No one knows their children better than they do.
- Just because a family is low-income doesn't mean they can't make the right choices for their children.
- Parents look at results when picking schools and teachers.
- All parents want something better for their kids.
- All kids can learn.
- All kids deserve a safe, loving and supportive educational environment.
- No one has time to wait.

Scholarship and voucher parents have researched options in their area, and they've picked the educational setting that works best for their children.

These are options available to every family of means in Florida, and should be open to families of lesser means as well.

The editorial argues that "if a growing portion of taxpayer money is going to be spent on private schools, the public deserves to know whether the cost is worth it." Let's be clear: Taxpayer money is spent on students. Families should be able to spend these funds on tuition and fees at the schools they choose. Like wealthier parents, our parents choose the appropriate educational setting, and that choice must be respected.

Turns out, when you give low-income parents more freedom to choose what's best for their kids, they choose wisely. So yes, it's worth it.

*Catherine Durkin Robinson is executive director of Florida Voices For Choices.*