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A skeptic revisits vouchers

By Jon East

The latest report from Education Week finds that less than half of all African-American students, many of whom live in poverty, graduate from high school in Florida. That's a staggering statistic, and none of us who believe public education is a sacred trust can rest until we try everything possible to reach every child who is poor and disadvantaged. Only in a polarized political environment, then, could a program offering a few of those children a different learning option be viewed by well-meaning people as an affront to public schools.

The rub, of course, is that this option comes through private schools willing to take on the challenge in Florida for the modest sum of \$3,950 per student this year. The program is funded by companies that receive a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for their donations to state-approved nonprofits that give tuition scholarships to poor children. Because private schools are involved, the Corporate Tax Credit Scholarships get branded with the emotionally charged label of "vouchers," and all sense of proportion is lost.

I know. I've been there. But it is an ideological trap.

The raw feelings are understandable. Many of the education reform efforts in the quarter-century since the "Nation at Risk" have made public school teachers feel like scapegoats. In many cases, they give superhuman efforts trying to save low-income children, only to have their school labeled a failure. No wonder teachers are wary. That doesn't mean, however, that every private alternative is an attack on public education. In some cases, and scholarships for low-income children is surely one, the intent is merely to give disadvantaged students another tool to succeed.

How could anyone begrudge that?

In Florida, Corporate Tax Credit Scholarships are available only to students whose family incomes meet federal guidelines for free and reduced

lunch. Last year, the average income for a CTC household of four was \$24,489. Remarkably, these parents also pay out of pocket an average of about \$1,000 per child to participate. The Legislature also puts a limit on the number of students who can take the option. This year that limit was increased to about 25,000 - or roughly one in every 50 of the state's low-income students.

The private schools, and there are more than 900 participating, don't have all the answers. But they offer different learning environments that may match the learning styles for different students. Step in to the Yvonne C. Reed Christian School in St. Petersburg, for example, and find a small, tightly knit group of mostly African-American students with a principal who hugs and laughs and knows every child by name. The school uses a reading curriculum that the founder and principal, a 34-year veteran of Pinellas public schools, contends is better suited for her students. One month into the school year, kindergartners are combining consonants and vowels with obvious pride, and Yvonne Reed-Clayton says, convincingly, "Come back in January, and they'll be reading."

In an education world increasingly focused on individual learning needs, "private" doesn't have to be the adversary of "public." And "uniformity," a constitutional term that education lawyers argue about, can't possibly mean there should be just one way to teach. Look around. Charter schools are private by every standard measure, but can offer opportunities not otherwise available. School districts often contract with private agencies for alternative or after-school programs and with private schools to serve children with special needs. Within most districts, students also have an array of options - arts and science and math magnets, International Baccalaureate, fundamental schools, career academies, gifted programs, community college classes, online courses. All are aimed at offering the learning environment that best fits each student.

Nowhere is this approach more important, perhaps, than with children who live in poverty. Their obstacles are extraordinary. They may come to school hungry, sleepy, with medical issues. They may move constantly from place to place and live in homes with one parent and no books and no support for homework. The educational repercussions are numbing. Last year, only 48 percent of the state's 1.2-million low-income students scored at grade level on standardized reading tests. Their achievement gap is 24 percentage points wide.

I used to find the line between public and private to be a bright one. But my simple dichotomy kept running up against the changing way our public schools deliver education. Worse, it created in me an untenable resistance to some potentially rewarding options for children who have precious few. Now I work for the group that oversees the corporate scholarship program, and some of my friends in public education think I've lost my mind.

They argue that it robs money from public education, even though the state treasury saves about \$3,000 for every student enrolled in the program. They say it undermines public schools, even though the only students who leave are the ones who are typically the greatest challenge. They say the required standardized tests are not enough to hold private schools accountable, while almost spitefully insisting on a standard, the FCAT, they otherwise eschew.

To me, reformer John Dewey had it right when he described public education as the "crucible of democracy," and I would never want to diminish it. But the political war over vouchers is a distraction to our collective effort to lift up children in poverty. Poor kids aren't public or private. They are simply in need, and they deserve all of our best efforts.

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