

Orlando Sentinel

REACHING 1.3 MILLION PEOPLE WEEKLY IN PRINT AND ONLINE

Let's level
playing field
for schools.
Thomas, B1

Don't let any school skate on standards



Mike Thomas

Florida is all about school choice.

We have 389 charter schools and a state-run virtual school. We have private-school scholarships for low-income students and private-school scholarships for students with disabilities.

This gives parents who can't afford private school an option. The competition improves public schools.

But in the rush for options, we don't want to repeat the same problem that allowed public schools to falter — a lack of standards and accountability.

We already saw this happen with charter schools. The rush to get them going took priority over the need to monitor them. This led to problems with many of them, including financial failures and a lack of academic accountability.

School choice without school accountability does not improve education. It can be counterproductive if alternative schools simply become a way to skirt academic standards required in traditional public schools.

This takes me to two proposals that could be pending in the Legislature this year — one dealing with vouchers and the other with virtual schools.

The voucher proposal would expand a publicly funded scholarship program for low-income kids called the Florida Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship Program.

It now serves about 25,000 kids in more than 1,000 schools. The schools get \$3,950 for each student. This compares to the per-pupil cost in public schools of \$6,873.

It is quite a savings for the state. But

the private schools complain they lose money, which limits participation.

The people operating the program want to expand it by making more money available. They also would increase the compensation per student to \$5,500 to encourage more schools to participate.

It is a good idea that needs to be made better.

Here is the problem: Like public schools, private schools are required to give standardized tests to measure student gains. But unlike public-school students, the kids in private school don't have to meet a specified level of proficiency on the tests.

For example, if they fail the reading test, the school doesn't have to retain them, as is the case in public schools.

So you can get a student leaving a typical K-8 scholarship school and entering a public high school without ever having needed to meet a learning benchmark. He bombs the FCAT, and the school is stuck with the expensive and sometimes impossible task of bringing him up to grade level.

I can't tell you how much this is happening because it hasn't been examined.

Kids from scholarship schools need to be tracked through high school and into college. Schools that consistently turn out unprepared students need to be booted from the program.

Parents also should have access to a school's test scores before enrolling their kids in it.

And last, I'm not a big fan of across-the-board increases. Giving every school the same \$5,500 increase rewards mediocrity, not success.

Instead, schools should continue getting the \$3,950 they now get.

But they should be eligible for bonuses based on test scores, earning up to the full \$6,873 it costs to send a student to public school. This encourages the

successful schools to take on more students. It discourages the bad ones from hanging on.

I also think there should be some sort of "Gold Seal" award issued by the state to good schools to motivate them and help parents in the selection process.

Now let's look at the competition brewing in the world of virtual schools. They are the new frontier of education and will render our current concept of schools obsolete in 15 years.

This has kicked off a stampede of private virtual schools into the market, many of them angling for public dollars.

It is a wonderful thing, and Florida is ripe for it. The state-owned Florida Virtual School is the best in the country.

It gets high marks from parents and students. Kids do well on standardized tests. Those who take Advanced Placement classes have a higher passing rate on the final AP test than students from traditional schools.

The school succeeds because it has good state-certified teachers, strong curriculum, high standards and accountability. Setting up a virtual school entails more than buying algebra software and giving kids who have questions a 1-800 number to a call center in India.

The last thing we need with virtual schools are the types of problems that gave charter schools a bad name.

A state report recommends slowing down the digital revolution until quality safeguards are in place, such as rigorous end-of-year exams.

That makes sense.

We need school competition, a lot more of it than we now have. But it must be competition aimed at improving education, or it will produce quite the opposite result.

That means all competitors have to start on the same level playing field.

Mike Thomas can be reached at 407-420-5525 or mthomas@orlandosentinel.com.