



Changes to Tax Credit Scholarships have bipartisan support



By JOHN KIRTLEY
Guest Columnist

One striking part about the legislative plan this year to strengthen a learning option for Florida's poorest children is the extent to which it is bringing lawmakers of both parties together.

The bill looks to improve the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, which empowers low-income parents to choose a public or private school that best suits their children's needs.

It does so by demanding more accountability and transparency, and also providing for a more equitable scholarship. It is already winning approving nods on both sides of the political aisle.

Will Weatherford, the Republican chairman of the House Education Policy Council, said upon filing the bill: "Florida has an options that other states envy, but we must strengthen the one we have for our poorest families."

Bill Heller, the ranking Democrat on the same council, wrote: "The bottom line for me has always been the child. What benefits him or her, regardless of the funding source, is what's right. I'll always be an advocate for doing what's right for each child, and feel this program grants me this opportunity."

The program serves 27,600 students in 1,150 private schools across the state.

The scholarship is available only to students whose household income qualifies them for free or reduced lunch. A state-issued report in June found that those who choose to utilize the scholarship are among the poorest and lowest-performing in the public schools they leave behind. That same report said that test score gains for scholarship students in 2007-08 equaled those of students at all income levels nationally.

Rep. Weatherford's bill would require schools with at least 30 scholarship students to publicly post their standardized test-score gains. Schools that receive at least \$250,000 in scholarship funds would have to file a financial report by a certified accountant. These provisions would make Florida's program the most transparent and accountable in the nation.

The bill would also reduce the growing gap between the maximum scholarship, \$3,950, and the average private-school tuition, \$6,335, and allow the program to more easily meet student demand. The scholarship would be indexed to four-fifths of the state's base education spending formula, which translates to about half the total amount spent on a public school student. To allow for growth, the program cap could be increased by 25 percent once 90 percent of its current cap is reached. The scholarship would remain Florida's only major education option with a cap.

Florida is in a budget crisis, and this program is part of the solution. The scholarship is financed by companies whose contributions receive a dollar-for-dollar credit on their corporate income or insurance premium taxes. Those tax-credited contributions then are used to pay for scholarships that cost roughly one-third the total amount spent per student in public schools.

Florida's Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability studied those comparative costs and found that for every \$1 lost to this tax credit, the state saves \$1.49. The agency reported that taxpayers saved \$39 million in 2007-08 alone. These savings can be used to fund other critical state needs.

Some of our friends in public education still have reservations because this program empowers parents to choose

private schools.

But one reason the program has been able to achieve such bipartisan support is that it is not an attack on public education. It is merely one of the options in a public education system that is customizing learning for all students.

Parents need to be able to choose from all options: magnets, charters, virtual schools and the schools serving these scholarship children.

The scholarship is aimed exclusively at helping public education fulfill its commitment to its most vulnerable students.

The average household income of families on the program is only 20 percent above poverty; three-fifths of the students live with a single parent, and three-fourths are black or Hispanic.

That may be why nearly half the Democrats, a majority of the Black Caucus and the entire Hispanic Caucus voted last year to strengthen the program. And why Florida civil rights icon Rev. H.K. Matthews, who marched with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma, Ala., has stepped forward to support the bill. "I now dedicate my efforts to what I believe is a natural extension of the civil-rights movement," he recently wrote, "equal educational opportunities for all children, regardless of socioeconomic status."

This program is not the sole solution for disadvantaged students, but it is an option that more underprivileged families are seeking. No wonder legislators are finding common ground supporting it.

John Kirtley, a Tampa businessman, is chairman of a nonprofit organization that oversees the Tax Credit Scholarship program and is a member of the Hillsborough Education Foundation.