

Having educational options helped my daughters

Parents around Florida may be celebrating “back to school” after a long summer with their kids, but we also secretly hope we’ve done right by our children with the choices we’ve made for them. Choices that include where our children attend school.

My three daughters grew up in a neighborhood drowning with poverty. We became a family that endured sickness and, for a time, homelessness. That wasn’t the destiny I wanted for my girls. I knew that education, including access to college, was a key ingredient to better jobs and a better life.

Makes a difference

Thankfully, we live in a state that empowers parents with educational choices for their children. For the first time this year, more than 100,000 low-income and working-class students will



**EBONY
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GUEST COMMENTARY

be using the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, which gives them the opportunity to attend private schools that may be a better fit for them. My girls and I know what a difference that can make.

After elementary school ended, we visited our neighborhood middle school during an open house that can only be described as “chaos.” My efforts to set up parent-teacher conferences before the start of the year were even declined. I know this is not this is not the experience of many parents, but we felt unwanted and began to look for other edu-

cational options.

Top education

At first, we tried a charter school that emphasized arts and theater, but eventually I felt there wasn’t enough focus on academics. With a little more research, I discovered Academy Prep in Tampa and with the help of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, I could provide my girls with a top-notch private prep school education.

Academy Prep challenged each of my girls, raising the bar every year.

Imani, my cheerleader and theatrical singer, eventually graduated from Berkeley Prep and Bard College in New York. She’s now a financial services specialist at Regions Bank.

Esme, my quiet middle child, graduated from Tampa Bay Christian and attends Hillsborough Community College, where she studies accounting.

My youngest, Eliya, just graduated from Tampa Bay Christian and is about to leave the nest for Southeastern University. Overcoming her own adversities, in-

cluding a diagnosis with Graves’ disease, she earned more than \$10,000 in college scholarships.

My girls beat the odds, and I know it was because they received an excellent education thanks to the scholarship.

Saving money

I know there are critics out there that want school choice programs, like the tax credit scholarship, to end. They believe the scholarship diverts money from public schools that could benefit from the resources.

But this is a fiction. Last year, the scholarship was worth \$5,886, while per-pupil spending in Florida public schools was more than \$10,000. The value of the scholarship has always been less than funding in public schools. That’s why every study shows it doesn’t drain public money. It saves public money!

That’s also why Florida courts dismissed the recent lawsuit that tried to kill the scholarship program. The teachers’ union, NAACP and other plaintiffs tried to argue the program was taking

money from public schools and hurting public schools. But when the judges asked for evidence, the plaintiffs couldn’t provide any.

Still struggling

Many inner-city schools were troubled long before the scholarship began 15 years ago, and many struggle to this day. Education can help stop the cycle of poverty, but only if students have access to options that work best for them. The scholarship program is just one way to do that.

I’ve seen Florida grow in many ways since my children first enrolled in elementary school. We have charter schools, virtual schools, magnet schools. Even scholarships to help children with special needs. I’m just happy the options I discovered worked wonders for my daughters.

I hope the 100,000 students on the tax credit scholarship this year find just as much success.

Ebony Smith is a Tampa resident.