



COMMUNITY VOICES

When it comes to schools, parents know best

Tony Barhoo

In its Feb. 21 editorial, The News-Journal suggested Florida's school choice scholarship programs weren't accountable enough, and so shouldn't be expanded despite overwhelming demand. The paper took special aim at the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship for lower-income students, which serves 100,000 students statewide. Two-thirds are black or Hispanic. Their average family income is \$25,756 a year. And it has a waiting list of 13,000 — which is why Gov. DeSantis proposed a new scholarship.

The governor and other supporters "should work to find ways to make vouchers

more effective," the paper wrote. Just this month, the respected Urban Institute released a study that found Florida Tax Credit Scholarship students were up to 43 percent more likely to go to four-year colleges than like students in public schools, and up to 20 percent more likely to earn bachelor's degrees. The results were even better for students who used the scholarship multiple years.

Our school, Living Faith Academy, serves 166 students, 155 of whom are on the scholarship. Contrary to what critics may think, the Legislature has made significant changes to regulations in recent years. We are required to annually test students in grades 3-10 in math and reading and report results to parents. Students at Living Faith are tested three times per year using the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) to access student growth. This year,

65 percent of our students have made growth targets in math, and 69 percent in reading. The national average is 50 percent.

We are also required to notify parents of teacher credentials and expertise (100 percent of ours hold four-year degrees or higher) and schools are required to submit financial audits if they receive \$250,000 or more from any combination of scholarship sources. Most importantly, parents are free to choose our school at any time, including the right to leave and enroll elsewhere.

To say this program is unregulated or unaccountable is simply false.

Scholarships do not come at the expense of public schools either. In fact, the maximum our school receives is \$6,815, which is a fraction of what public schools receive. The average value of a scholarship, according to a 2017 report

from Florida TaxWatch, is just 55 percent of per-pupil spending in Florida's public schools.

Better outcomes at less cost? How can this be if the program is so unaccountable? It's because educational choice programs are built on a different definition of accountability — one that balances regulations with empowering parents with the right to choose a school that best fits their child's needs.

There is a range of quality in private schools, just as there is in public schools. I know firsthand, having spent 26 years working with at-risk kids for Volusia County. It's not hard to find scandals and shenanigans in every education sector. Nobody with a fair mind would string together all the negative headlines about public schools in Florida and use it to bludgeon the entire sector.

Still, some facts cannot be ignored. There remains a huge achievement gap between students of color and white students in Volusia County. Black and Hispanic students in Volusia also trail black and Hispanic students elsewhere, scoring behind their counterparts statewide in every single tested grade. It's no wonder that the graduation rate for black and Hispanic students in Volusia is dead last among the state's biggest districts. We've simply got lots of improvement to do all around, and I don't think piling on more top-down regulations on public, or private, schools will help anyone.

The evidence shows parents are good at figuring out which schools are truly best for their kids. Giving more parents more power only makes sense.

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