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A place to thrive: A school choice scholarship saved my son's life

By Melissa Merritt

Two years ago, my 8-year-old was falling through the cracks. My husband and I had adopted him from foster care, knowing he had emotional issues and learning disabilities. But in public school, his issues were getting worse.

The school called me nearly every day because my son was acting out, rolling under desks and smart mouthing his teachers. He was also getting picked on by his classmates. I know he had many challenges, but I also felt the school wasn't responsive enough to strategies I knew could help.

To save him, I had to make a change. Luckily, I heard about the tax credit scholarship, a type of school choice scholarship that allowed me to put him in a different school.

In the fall of 2015, I enrolled my son in Saint John Paul II Catholic School, using the scholarship to help pay the tuition. A different school made all the difference. By the end of the school year, he was listening in class and steadily learning. He was also making friends. Within two weeks of being at his new school, he was invited to a birthday party. For the first time in his life.

I wanted to share my son's story because of a recent article, "Tax Credit Scholarship Program part of move to expand vouchers," that said negative things about this scholarship that saved my son's life. I've come to learn that some people think the program is "controversial," even though it's for low-income children and foster children. I've also come to learn many things said about it are not true.

For instance, some people say the scholarship program drains money from public schools. But here are the facts: The scholarship is worth \$5,886. That's 60 percent of what it costs taxpayers to educate the same child in a public school. That's why every single study that has looked at this question of money draining finds the scholarship saves taxpayer money, while not a single study says otherwise. That's also part of the reason why a recent lawsuit that tried to kill the scholarship failed.

The plaintiffs claimed the program was hurting public schools, but could not back up their claims with any evidence. That's why two courts that looked at the lawsuit dismissed it, before the Florida Supreme Court did the same in January.

The recent article also suggested that private schools with

scholarship students aren't as accountable as public schools, and that they're refusing to educate children who are "too difficult or resource demanding."

If that was true, why did Saint John Paul II take my son? And why are private schools all over the state taking thousands of other scholarship students who were struggling in public schools?

They take them because they want to help them. And they know if they don't, their parents can take their child, with the scholarship, to another school. When people claim private schools aren't accountable, I have to ask, what could be more accountable than the power of a parent to change schools if they are not satisfied?

Saint John Paul II did so much right with our son. They notified me whenever an issue came up, so we could work together on fixing it. They had a regimented schedule, which was good for my son, who needs structure. The teachers and parents also formed an excellent support network.

But my son continued to struggle in reading. It was a tough decision, but last fall I switched him to Solid Rock Christian Academy, which specializes more in helping struggling readers. That wasn't the fault of Saint John Paul II. No school can be all things to all children. Solid Rock offered enough of a difference, in the area where my son needed help, that transferring him was the best thing to do.

Now my son is making strides in reading. And that progress with academics is spilling over to his behavior, which continues to improve from the leaps he made at Saint John Paul II.

From the numbers I've seen, there are nearly 100,000 students in Florida who use tax credit scholarships. I have no doubt many of them are like my son — kids who may struggle in one school, but can thrive in another. Thank goodness for these scholarships, for giving parents like me the power to put their child in the school that best helps them succeed.

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