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A Florida Perspective: School district employees like school choice, too

By Ron Matus

This fall, tens of thousands of parents are using Florida tax credit scholarships to send their children to private schools. More than 1,200 of them work for school districts.

That's a lot of support from public school employees for a program the Florida teachers union is trying to kill.

We shouldn't be surprised. The parents who work for districts are no different than other parents in the mix. For many of them, the tax credit scholarship offers a potentially life-changing opportunity, a chance to put their child in a school where they can finally soar.

It's understandable if folks thought district employees might have a different view.

When the union filed a lawsuit against the scholarship in 2014, the Florida School Boards Association joined as a plaintiff. So did the Florida Association of School Administrators. Both dropped out after the first judge dismissed it. Meanwhile, the myth that the program "drains" money from public schools continues to cycle, despite multiple independent reports showing it doesn't, and not a single report showing it does.

In August, the First District Court of Appeal dismissed the suit, concluding, like the lower court, that the plaintiffs did not prove their claims of harm to public schools. But last month, the union requested an appeal to the Florida Supreme Court.

For scholarship families, this ensures more anxiety. Two-thirds are black or Hispanic; their average family income is about \$24,000 a year. Without the scholarship, they won't be able to keep their children in the schools that are working for them.

We know how many district employees have children on scholarship because parents list their employers on applications to Step Up For Students, the nonprofit that helps administer the program. Their presence adds another twist to the lawsuit. If it succeeds, the teachers union will not only be denying a vital educational choice to 93,000 low-income and working-class students, but also to the students of 1,200 district workers who, in many cases,

are fellow union members.

We don't have a breakdown by job title. But it's a safe bet many of these employees are "support staff": clerks, custodians, bus drivers, food service workers and so on. Given their incomes, a far greater percentage of workers in these categories would be eligible for scholarships than teachers.

The reasons they seek the scholarship are endless, just as they are for other parents. Test data shows us the typical scholarship students were the one who struggled the most in their former schools. Often, their parents are desperate.

One bus driver told me she got a scholarship after her district, in response to a single fight, determined her daughter should be placed in a school for disruptive students. Mom feared that path led straight downhill. So she enrolled her child in a small school that provided more 1-on-1 attention. Now she's breathing easier as grades and attitude improve.

The bus driver also secured a scholarship for her son, even though she decided for now to leave him in public school. So far, so good. But she said it's comforting to know she has options.

Public school teachers are also in the ranks of scholarship parents. That, too, should not be surprising. Surveys show public school teachers enroll their children in private schools at higher rates than other parents.

One scholarship parent/teacher, the mother of a foster child who had behavioral issues, told me her son went from D's and F's in his prior school to A's in his new one. Private schools aren't for everyone. But for her son, it was the right fit.

She wondered why anyone would want to take that option away from him.

Especially her fellow school district employees.

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