

ORLANDO ADVOCATE

Editorial: Tax Credit Scholarships not the real problem

We appreciate and celebrate the efforts of those who dedicate their lives to the teaching of our children. We also understand the difficulties, both programmatically and financially, ‘involved in undertaking this profession . We cannot, however, ignore that something is deeply wrong with public school education in America, and in our state. And rather than give up on it, it needs to be fixed. But while we contemplate the process of repair, we should not deprive students of the opportunity to get the education they want and deserve by forcing them to deal with the ineptitude of adults who for years have had the reigns of a school system that continues to decline.

The state legislature created the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program to provide another choice for students looking for a better educational opportunity than that afforded by public schools. The program, while controversial, helps low-income, mostly minority children afford the cost of attending private schools.

The teachers union is opposed, for reasons pretty obvious to all, because any tax money diverted away from public education is money that will not be paid to a teacher in public school– even if it is money that is not being taken away from public education. It was not surprising therefore when the Florida Education Association (FEA), Florida School Boards Association (FSBA), Florida Congress of Parents and Teachers (PTA), Florida Association of School Administrators (FASA), League of Women Voters of Florida (LWVFL), and Florida members of the Americans United for Separation of Church and State (AU) sued the State of Florida seeking to shut the program down. What was somewhat surprising– to us, at least– was that the Florida State Conference of Branches of NAACP (FLNAACP) joined the lawsuit as an additional plaintiff.

The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship is presently serving more than 90,000 low-income children in more than 1,600 private schools. The plaintiff group says the program is unconstitutional. Two courts so far have denied them any relief.

The argument against the program, although stated somewhat differently, seems to be that by allowing students to leave public schools, the program robs public schools of much needed per-pupil income from the state while school expenses remain high.

But so far the plaintiffs have failed to make a case that any individual student is suffering because of the program, or that per-pupil funding from the state has been reduced. Additionally, there has been no evidence of any kind that the scholarship program is responsible for any of the problems causing the exodus of scholarship students. Let’s face it– tax credit scholarships are not why students are bailing out of public education. Scouring the website will provide a multitude of failings. Until educators get it right and make public education appealing to the students who really want to learn, student departure will not let up.

The plaintiffs, though, have vowed to go all the way to the Supreme Court to have the program declared unconstitutional. And yet, so far they have failed to demonstrate they even have standing (i.e., a sufficient legal interest in the matter) to be allowed to bring the case to court. They have been unable to demonstrate how they have been harmed by its operation. Funding for education has not ebbed under Gov. Rick Scott. During the scholarship program’s entire 15-year existence, funding for public schools has not been reduced. He has even pushed for record levels of K-12 education funding in the past two state budgets.

Tax credit scholarship opponents should focus on fixing what’s wrong with public education with its existing levels of education funding. Maybe by making them as scholastically attractive as the private schools seem to be, students will want to stay where they are. The best way to challenge this program is to demonstrate it is no longer needed– not to arbitrarily deny students (and parents) the right to choose.

Killing off a program that helps poor and needy families give their children an educational boost to a better life is in our opinion not the way to accomplish this result.