

Parents must stay up to date in education



**John
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MY VIEW

The power of parents to pick a school that is the best fit for their child – school choice – has become the new normal in Florida. More than 1 million K-12 students whose educations are funded by taxpayers – more than 30 percent of the total student population – now attend something other than their zoned neighborhood school. What a change from a generation ago!

But the legions of parents who appreciate this diversity should be aware of a serious threat looming in the Florida court system. An ongoing and misguided attempt by the state teachers union to kill one of these options will, if successful, pave the way for future attempts to kill even more options. No school choice option – whether offered in private, charter or district schools – will be immune under the union’s legal reasoning.

In 2014, the teachers union filed suit to end the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, a popular, effective, 15-year-old program that is serving 97,000 low-income and working-class students in 1,700 private schools. The union lost the first two rounds in court, with both courts concluding the union did not prove its claims of harm to public schools.

But the union has continued to appeal, and its latest request for appeal now sits before the Florida Supreme Court. The legal limbo has left scholarship parents fearing their kids will be kicked out of schools they love and returned to schools where they were struggling.

The union’s main argument is that, in its view, the scholarships are not consistent with language in the Florida Constitution that calls for a “uniform” system of public schools. If tax credit scholarships are declared unconstitutional, how could other options survive if challenged?

Charter schools are publicly funded but privately operated. Is that uniform? Magnet schools offer different curricula in line with their themes. Is that uniform? IB programs have strict eligibility requirements and cater to the academically elite. Dual enrollment programs involve community colleges. Is any of that uniform?

The concept of “uniformity” is absurd in the context of 21st-century education. Choice and customization is standard operating procedure in every sector of modern life. There is no good reason public education should be different.

School choice is a result of finally realizing each child is unique, that each educational experience must be tailored to each student in order to maximize engagement and learning. The teachers union and other groups that oppose choice are working to put our parents and children back in the Dark Ages – where one size fits all.

Make no mistake: School choice has made public education better. Just visit your local public school and ask about all the district choices that didn’t exist a decade ago. The more options there are, the more opportunity there is for more students to find success.

John Legg is school administrator and classroom teacher in Pasco County. He was Chairman of the Senate K-12 from 2012-2016, Speaker Pro-Tempore of the Florida House of Representatives from 2010-2012, and Chairman of House K-12 from 2008-2010.