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Scholarships help our most disadvantaged students

By Dr. Frank O'Harroll



It has always pained me to see children struggle in school, become discouraged and fail to reach their potential.

As a pastor, I would counsel and encourage the children and their parents, but I wanted to do more.

For decades, I dreamed of establishing a small Christian-based school that could focus on these students and help them thrive. Eighteen years ago, we started a preschool at New Bethel Missionary Baptist Church in Winter Haven. That helped, but it wasn't enough, and I didn't have the resources to sponsor a grade school.

But then the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program made my dream come true.

The program offers tax credits to businesses that contribute to a scholarship fund. The scholarships, administered by Step Up for Students, go to low-income and working-class families, allowing them the option of selecting a private school.

This school year, for the first time, the scholarship is serving more than 100,000 students statewide.

Those scholarships allowed me to start the Bethel Christian Academy 11 years ago, serving students from PreK through eighth grade. It became the first minority private school in Winter Haven. The Academy is small, but we give our approximately 40 students the intense care that would be impossible elsewhere.

Some people, unfortunately, see the scholarships as an affront to public schools.

I am a proud public-school product and strongly support them. But I can't understand why anyone would object to empowering low-income parents to choose the school that best meets their child's needs.

We know from test data that scholarship students often struggled in public schools, but are now making good

progress in their new schools. We also know their average family income is \$24,000 a year, meaning that without the scholarship, their parents couldn't afford to enroll them in the schools where they are finally succeeding.

Our Bethel Christian Academy is an example of the kind of options the scholarships provide.

Our class sizes are small and our teachers, most with public school experience, give students one-on-one attention. Beyond concentrating on academics, we pray with the children and lead them with God's word. I serve as principal, but take no pay. I feel the task is a pastoral responsibility.

Tuition is \$7,000 a year, but we accept the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, which was valued at \$5,886 last year, as full tuition. We rigorously monitor our students' progress with standardized tests, both the Iowa Assessments and the Stanford Achievement Test Series. We also receive public support through Title I and Exceptional Student Education programs.

I have witnessed spellbinding changes in our children. One of our students was so angry he seemed ready to explode. He lashed out at everyone. I visited his home and discovered his father was in prison. He felt abandoned. I advised him to write to his father, and put his feelings on paper.

He did and his father responded. Now he and his father correspond regularly and the young man's turnaround has been amazing. He is not only a diligent student but also is a peacemaker who helps other students deal with their frustrations.

Some of the Academy's families are members of our church and some are not; but we make sure we are connected to all of them. We are there to help them cope with deaths, traumas, economic hardships and other crises.

Our students do well when they go on to high school, whether it's a public or private school.

Bethel Christian Academy is no threat to the public-school system. But our little school is making a huge difference in the lives of children who otherwise might never have found their way in a larger school.

If you look at what is happening at Bethel Christian Academy, you'll understand why I believe the Florida Tax Scholarship Program is a Godsend for families.

Dr. Frank O'Harroll is pastor at New Bethel Missionary Baptist Church in Winter Haven, which is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year. He also is principal of Bethel Christian Academy, which is Eagle Lake.