



May 4, 2018

Doug Tuthill: Education improves with a sense of ownership

By Drew Wilson

Public education will only improve when people buy in, Step Up for Students President Doug Tuthill said Thursday at the Florida Chamber of Commerce Summit on Prosperity & Economic Opportunity.

“I’m going to start with the good news: public education today is in the best shape that it’s ever been in,” Tuthill said, citing the teaching quality and a National Assessment of Education Progress “report card,” which showed some progress.

“The bad news is the beneficiaries of progress tend to be people of privilege. It tends to be people with resources who come to school with a lot of social capital, and they’re able to benefit from our public education system.

“Unfortunately, this system isn’t capable of really addressing this issue of generational poverty the way that it needs to be — and that’s our challenge. It’s not a people problem; it’s a systemic problem.”

Tuthill said the root of that problem is the undermining of a sense of “ownership” for a majority of people — be they teachers, parents or students — in public education.

“We’ve all heard the phrase ‘nobody ever washes a rental car before they return it,’” he said. “Because they don’t own the rental car. You don’t take care of things that you don’t own. And what we’re seeing is our public education system, too often, has way too many renters in the system.”

Creating a sense of ownership among those who lack it is key to improving education, he said.

“Public education is our primary human development institution,” he said. “That’s the institution that really has

to be able to develop the kids who need it most. And, frankly, that’s our greatest failure.”

Tuthill said the typical student receiving a scholarship through the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program, which his organization administers, lives in extreme poverty — the average family of four in the program makes about \$25,000 a year. The program also attracts some of the lowest-performing students in the state.

Yet when they get the scholarship and enroll in a private school, many quickly develop upward momentum in academics. That turnaround comes despite many of these private schools being unable to compete with public schools in teacher wages, teaching quality, technology or facilities.

The scholarships also only pay private schools about 60 cents on the dollar compared to the cost of education in a public school.

The difference maker, Tuthill reiterated, is ownership. And recreating that sense of ownership for public schools is the challenge, with the primary obstacle in the way of accomplishing that feat being politics.

“We created basically an assembly line, one-size-fits-all education system in order to be effective and efficient,” he said. “But kids don’t fit into that model.”

According to Tuthill, the factory style roots of public schools led to teacher unions that share a lot of similarities with factory worker unions. As with any union, one of their main functions is keeping the current system in place, he said, causing them to stand in the way of creating an education system built for the 21st Century.