

TAX CREDIT SCHOLARSHIPS

Reaction to the lawsuit against Tax Credit Scholarships

FROM PARENTS:

Faith Manuel, Ormond Beach, parent of one student on scholarship and another who benefitted from a scholarship and is now in college

"If not for the tax credit scholarship, my daughter wouldn't be so in love with school and learning. My daughter couldn't find her place at her public middle school. She's now in a place where she thrives academically, socially and emotionally. Why would anyone want to take that away from her?"

Susan Cooney, St. Petersburg, mother of a scholarship student at Admiral Farragut Academy

"Why would they want to stop the scholarship? Pinellas has some good schools and some great fundamental schools. But some people are not fortunate enough to get into great schools. Are great schools only for the elite?"

Iris Mejia, Miami, mother of a scholarship student at Christopher Columbus High School

"I am forever grateful that I can go to work every day in peace knowing that my son is safe, well-protected, and in an environment that promotes sports, discipline, respect and religious faith. This (tax credit scholarship) has been a blessing for us – it has completely transformed my son's life. I would not have had the same outcome if I had not had the scholarship."

Autumn Nelson, Yalaha, mother of three scholarship students at Liberty Christian Prep in Tavares

Without the scholarships for her children, "I would have to stay home and quit my job because the public options just aren't good. I would not feel safe sending them. Thank God for this program. I don't know where we would be without it."

FROM SCHOOL OFFICIALS:

Stacy Angier, Margate, principal of Abundant Life Christian Academy

When Stacy Angier became principal of Abundant Life Christian Academy over a decade ago, there were four students enrolled with tax credit scholarships. Today those students are starting their senior year at a school that now serves 180 scholarship students. "This program has done a good job for so many children," said Angier. "It is really sad that the school boards association has to sue. They should focus on improving their own schools to win students back rather than suing to force them to return."

Frank Runnels, vice president for education for Florida Conference of Seventh-Day Adventists

"We are disappointed to hear about this lawsuit. This scholarship helps many children afford a private education and without this scholarship many wouldn't be able to attend a school of their choice. There are so many positives from the program. We hope and pray this scholarship prevails."

Michelle Pacheco, Orlando, principal of Potter's House Academy

"We talk about freedom of choice and freedom of speech. Don't our children have the choice of where they want to go? ... Sixty-percent of our moms are single mothers. So having this opportunity to put their kids in a private school is huge."

Alberto Vazquez-Matos, superintendent, Diocese of St. Petersburg

"It's going to affect, just in my diocese, about 2,500 lives. Because of the program, we have graduated high school students who are now in Ivy League colleges. They are there because they received a quality education."

Ailynn Hernandez, Miami, director of La Progresiva Presbyterian School

This year, 431 of 543 students at La Progresiva use tax credit scholarships. Without the scholarships, “Most of these kids would probably fall through the cracks and not get the education or attention that they need,” Hernandez said. “That’s a very sad thing that we’re fighting about this again. This program helps children who need it most.”

FROM FAITH LEADERS:**Pastor Mark Coats, Grace of God Baptist Church in Miami and headmaster of Grace Christian Preparatory School**

“If this (scholarship) ended, it would be horrific. You will see the dropout rate go up, the truancy levels go up, the frustration of children go up. Because of the program, those children found a new love for academics.”

Rabbi Moshe Matz, executive director, Agudath Israel of Florida

“To date, tens of thousands of children in our state have benefited greatly from this opportunity. The Jewish community has great appreciation for what this program has accomplished and for the positive impact it makes in our community and throughout the entire state. We support Step Up for Students and the corporate scholarship program completely and we encourage those who wish to challenge the validity of this program to consider the devastating impact it would have on the tens of thousands of children and their families if this scholarship is taken away from them.”

Pastor Randy Ray, North Florida Baptist Church, Tallahassee

"As a pastor and leader in the faith community, I oppose the proposed lawsuit from the Florida School Boards Association challenging the "Step Up for Students" initiative. Often overlooked is the fact that at the foundation of education is the right of parents to choose. All citizens in the state of Florida pay taxes which are used for a variety of needs including education. Parents who pay for private education, as well as citizens who do not have school children, pay for the funding of public schools like everyone else. Step Up for Students affords parents who do not have the means to make the choice for private education, to have choices. These parents are tax payers too. The announced lawsuit is an encroachment on parental rights and prejudicial against lower income families."

FROM EDUCATION LEADERS AND LAWMAKERS:**Governor Rick Scott**

“Parents should have the opportunity to provide their children with the best education possible – and this suit flies in the face of those families who care about their children’s future.”

Jeb Bush, former Governor of Florida

“The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program offers hope for parents and a life-changing education for children. This lawsuit is just the latest attack on parental choice by an entrenched education establishment more concerned about protecting the status quo than providing families the opportunities afforded by a great education.”

Gary Chartrand, chairman, Florida Board of Education

“Freedom is about choices. When we have limited choices we have limited freedom. I believe in choice and in freedom especially for those children that have limited mobility and limited financial resources. The Florida tax credit scholarships provide this freedom for our most underserved population to choose a school that best serves their needs. The Florida school boards association is acting without consideration for this population by filing a lawsuit against this program. This is surprising and disheartening, and I call on them to rethink their position and withdraw the lawsuit.”

Senate President Don Gaetz, Niceville

“The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program is a national model of school choice. Through this historic initiative, Florida businesses have voluntarily dedicated a portion of their corporate tax payments to help children in poverty, minority children and children with unique needs have access to schools and services otherwise available only to families with the means to pay for private school tuition.”

House Speaker Will Weatherford, Wesley Chapel

“It is appalling that the Florida School Boards Association, unions and others would use their power to try to block low-income parents from giving their children the education of their choice. This is a tactic completely motivated by the worst kind of bureaucratic politics that places the fears of an organization over the needs of children. We will vigorously defend this program because we know that it helps our most vulnerable children rise out of difficult circumstances and achieve true success.”

Senate President-Designate Andy Gardiner, Orlando

“Since 2001, the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program has provided Florida students with additional options to achieve academic success. Close to 60,000 students and their families who may not otherwise have the resources are now taking advantage of the opportunity provided by this program. Without using state education funding, this program allows parents to have control over their child’s educational experience.”

House Speaker-Designate Steve Crisafulli, Merritt Island

“It is disappointing and surprising that the Florida School Boards Association would challenge a parent’s ability to choose the right school for their child. The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program has given thousands of Florida low-income children access to schools that best meet their needs. This proven, popular program is essential for preparing children for success in college and the workforce. I hope school board members will reconsider their actions and put the needs of children first.”

State Sen. John Legg, Lutz

“The lawsuit filed today by the Florida Teachers Union, the School Board Association, and others is both disheartening and disappointing. This action will ultimately prove to benefit self-serving interest groups at the expense of highly desired education options for Florida’s children.”

State Sen. Kelli Stargel, Lakeland

“Parents deserve better than this. They want what’s best for their kids and are lining up for this program. It is unconscionable that the FSBA would go this far to keep low-income families from accessing a better education.”

State Rep. Erik Fresen, Miami

“This is sad. We have a program that – for years – has been working as a proven, solid option for kids who would otherwise be left with no other choice than a school that is failing them. And now a group of the very adults who should be thinking of students first is setting out to take this program away from them.”

State Rep. Manny Diaz Jr., Miami

“I don’t think the FSBA’s actions represent the views of its entire membership but it doesn’t make this any less appalling. As a former public school leader, I know there are many people in the public school system fighting for students, but it is clear the FSBA is not one of them.”

State Rep. Michael Bileca, Miami

“It is hard to believe the FSBA would attack a program that has helped so many of Florida’s most vulnerable students in some of the poorest communities in our state. They’ve just got it wrong and it’s a shame. The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program is providing a necessary school choice option for kids in Florida and, as long as I’m in office, I will continue siding with the families.”

FROM LOCAL SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS:

Nancy Stacy, member, Marion County School Board

“School boards brought this on themselves. If school boards would meet students’ needs, the parents would not need to seek schools outside the public school system.” The FSBA is filing suit because “they’re embarrassed by the success of the program. It exposes the fact that they’re not doing a good job.”

Jason Fischer, member, Duval County School Board

“These families have found something that works for their child. Why on earth would we disrupt that? Instead of acting as portfolio managers of different educational options, school boards are acting like kings of their own little kingdoms ... The scholarship program is a threat to their power and control.”

Jeff Bergosh, member, Escambia County School Board

“It’s all about the money. They don’t want to lose the FTE. Taxpayers save money with these students. And the statistics prove they get the equivalent amount of academic gains, if not better. I want what’s best for students. If that means the student transferring out of public school and using a tax credit scholarship, then we ought not to stand in the way ... This is people just trying to maintain an empire.”

Tim Weisheyer, chairman, Osceola County School Board

"I do not support this lawsuit. I am in favor of parents having options, and our district is a great example of how they work -- we have magnets, charters, virtual schools and more. This scholarship program needs to be on the table for low-income children to have equal access to educational options. I have had the pleasure of speaking with many families benefiting from this scholarship and call upon the FSBA leadership to stop this lawsuit."

Dale Simchick, member, Indian River County School Board

"I am absolutely opposed to this lawsuit. I call upon the FSBA to stop it. I am in favor of choice for low-income children, and this program must be preserved."

FROM OTHER EDUCATION AND BUSINESS LEADERS:

Kenneth Campbell, president, Black Alliance for Educational Options

“Programs like the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program offer children from low-income and working class families the opportunity to have access to high-quality educational options that will allow them to learn and succeed at high levels. They need this quality of education in order to compete globally. Any interruption of these programs will cause irreparable harm to our most vulnerable children – those who don’t have options.”

Julio Fuentes, president & CEO, Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, and president & CEO of the Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options

“HCREO supports an education system that includes high-quality choices for parents like The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program. But the Florida School Board Association’s planned lawsuit would take that option, often the only option for a better education, away from the highest-need families in Florida. This is simply not in the best interest of children.”

Mark Wilson, president & CEO of the Florida Chamber of Commerce

“It’s outrageous that the teacher’s union and school boards are suing to take opportunities away from children and their parents. Perhaps they are hoping Florida’s parents won’t notice.”

Chief Financial Officer Jeff Atwater, Department of Financial Services

“I am outraged by the lawsuit seeking to eliminate the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program. It is as tragic as it is inexplicable that the full weight of the professional academic establishment in this state would target the most vulnerable of our children. Does the number of disadvantaged children eligible for these programs pose such a serious threat to the entrenched establishment that it is willing to refocus attention away from the pressing needs of the system they administer to quash the hopes and dreams of those with greater needs? The plaintiffs do not demonstrate strength by attacking the weakest among us. That is a sign of intellectual and moral bankruptcy. Floridians deserve far better.”

Wendy Rivera, Multicultural Education Alliance

“All students in Florida deserve to have a great education, and school choice is a big part of making that a reality. Any parent who has ever moved to a different district or signed their child up for a magnet school knows that truth. Yet options are limited for families who do not have financial means or quality schools in their neighborhoods. The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship is one of few program that provides low-income families with education alternatives if their assigned neighborhood school does not meet their child’s needs. The lawsuit proposed by the Florida School Board Association against these scholarships is attacking what is often the only high-quality education options these students have”

Robert Enlow, president and CEO, Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice

“That the Florida School Boards Association would so callously jeopardize the educational future of almost 60,000 low-income children who participate in the 13-year-old Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program is shocking: Independent research, as well as reports from the Florida’s Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability, consistently prove that the program is working for parents, students and all Florida taxpayers.”

Dick Komer, senior attorney, Institute for Justice

“What is the matter with these people? They are trying to take away educational opportunities from nearly 60,000 low-income students provided by a program that has been going for 13 years. Did they suddenly wake up and say ‘Whoa Nelly, too many of the kids are voting with their feet, we have to stop that’? Why do they have it in for low-income minority students?”

Matthew Ladner, senior advisor for policy and research, Foundation for Excellence in Education

“People should ask themselves a simple question regarding this program: if you had to be reborn as a poor child in Florida next year, would you want this program to exist for you? Would you be better off being assigned to a school by your zip code, or would you prefer for the people who love and care for you to have a broad array of schooling options in order to meet your individual needs? Decades of high-quality academic research in Florida and elsewhere demonstrate that students, parents and schools all benefit from parental choice.”

Clint Bolick, vice president, Goldwater Institute

“What a shame that the Florida School Boards Association will use taxpayer funds to thwart educational opportunities for Florida schoolchildren. FSBA should direct its energy and limited taxpayer resources to improving public education, rather than thwarting educational reform.”