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# Lawsuit jeopardizes the interests of students, taxpayers

By SEN. DON GAETZ



Sen. Don Gaetz

The great divide in education is not between the haves and the have-nots, not the smart kids opposed to the ones who struggle, not children of color vs. white children. Those differences are all very real, but a decade of driving up and measuring performance has proved they are surmountable by effective teaching, parents who care and communities that insist on solutions, not excuses.

The educational divide that seemingly cannot be bridged is between those who think schools should operate for the benefit of adults and those who

believe that everything in education, from resources to curriculum to bus schedules, ought to be judged with one litmus test — what’s best for children?

This great divide is on vivid display in a lawsuit filed by the Florida School Boards Association and others against the interests of children who benefit from Tax Credit Scholarships.

Here’s how Tax Credit Scholarships work: Businesses paying state corporate tax can designate a portion of their taxes to help children in poverty, minority children and disabled children have access to schools and services otherwise available only to families with the means to pay private school tuition. The participation of business taxpayers, the schools and the students is all voluntary.

Statewide, 59,822 children in 64 counties received these scholarships last year. Nearly 2,000 children from our area benefit, attending 46 schools including — in Okaloosa and Walton counties — Rocky Bayou Christian School, St. Mary School, Calvary Christian Academy, Cinco Baptist School, Emerald Coast Christian School, Lakewood Christian School, Wellspring Performing Arts Christian School, Cornerstone Church Academy, First Christian Academy and South Walton Montessori Academy.

It’s not a giveaway. On average, the income of a scholarship family of four is \$25,000. These families dig in their own thin pockets to come up with \$500 per child, on average. Often that means parents working extra jobs so children can attend a better school. The scholarships pay an amount equal to only half what it would cost taxpayers for these same children to attend regular

public schools. So it’s a huge saver for taxpayers. More than half the scholarships go to African-Americans.

Now, the membership organization that our local school boards support is using our local tax dollars in a lawsuit to kill the scholarships. Their reason: “Those kids are our kids. That money is our money. We want it under our control.” A revealing use of the possessive adjective.

If the lawsuit is successful, 60,000 scholarship students will be forced out of the schools their parents chose and forced back into traditional public schools at twice the cost to taxpayers.

Full disclosure: As a senator, I sponsored expansion of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program in 2008. The program’s hallmark is the historic bipartisan support it has in the Florida Legislature. The year of my sponsorship, I wisely yielded the closing speech on the Senate floor to the Democratic leader, an African-American. He was brilliant. This isn’t about Republicans or Democrats. It’s about what’s best for kids.

In 2014, I passed stronger fiscal and academic oversight for this program. Students, their families and the public should know how scholarship students are performing compared with like students in traditional public schools. The auditor general is performing detailed financial examinations to ensure good stewardship of every dollar. I wish everything in education or involving tax dollars were this accountable.

The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program is a national model of voluntary school choice. It leverages the facilities and staff of excellent non-public schools to serve the public interest. It gives lower-income children what we all want for our children — a chance to learn and succeed.

That is what angers the plaintiffs in this lawsuit the most — that families are in charge of their own children, that caring parents willing to make sacrifices can choose their children’s schools and, most troublesome of all, that resources follow not the needs of educators but the interests of children.

As a former school board member, I’m ashamed of the Florida School Boards Association. As senator for Northwest Florida, I’ve chosen my side of the great divide.

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