



School choice scholarships help kids

point of view

Narlene
McLaughlin

Eighteen years ago, we created The Potter's House Christian Academy in Jacksonville because there

was a need to fill in the community.

We wanted to teach children not only academic facts but the realities of true success in life.

Our Creator commands us to teach children in the right way. Our school imparts moral character, instills discipline and teaches students how to live a good and honest life.

Many of our students would not be able to attend The Potter's House without a Florida tax credit scholarship.

This year, nearly 70,000 low-income students statewide are using the scholarships, including 5,334 in Duval and more than 300 at our school.

More than two-thirds of the scholarship students are black or Hispanic, more than half come from single-parent households and the average family income for them is \$24,067, barely above the poverty line.

Studies show they were often the students who struggled most in public schools and are now making solid gains.

So I have to wonder if the Florida Education Association and Florida School Board Association recognize the tremendous damage they will do with the lawsuit they filed in August against the scholarship program.

Why uproot 70,000 low-income children from the schools where they are succeeding? How smart is that?

These groups argue that helping poor kids, mostly black or brown, pay for private tuition "siphons" money from public schools. Interestingly, we never hear them make the same argument when wealthy families opt out of a public school even though it "siphons" the same amount of money.

The truth is, the scholarships don't hurt public schools financially as one study after another has shown.

It's actually public schools that would take a huge financial hit if they had to suddenly absorb 70,000 low-income kids at nearly twice the per-pupil cost of each scholarship.

School choice advocates like me are not against public schools. In fact, our church, The Potter's House Internation-

The more options we create, the better the chances of success for each child and better chances of success as a community.

al Ministries, is home to many public school teachers, and we highly support and appreciate them.

My husband, Bishop Vaughn McLaughlin, and I hear their concerns.

We know they are hard-working, talented and dedicated. They try their best to meet the needs of every student and they often succeed.

But some students still fall through the cracks. The scholarship program isn't a silver bullet, but it does provide another chance for many of these students.

Faith-based education is important to many families. This is why more than two-thirds of the students on the scholarship program have chosen faith-based schools.

I know some people have issues with this. But I also know the U.S. Supreme Court ruled it is not a problem.

In 2002, the court found private school choice scholarship programs to be constitutional so long as parents choose the school and can choose from a variety of religious and non-religious options.

As a society, it is our duty to do something for economically disadvantaged children whether it is creating a public school for at-risk students, innovating with public charter schools or providing scholarships to attend private school.

The more options we create, the better the chances of success for each child and better chances of success for all of us as a community.

With their lawsuit, the teachers unions and school boards are trying to limit those options. While we are striving to teach students to do the right thing, we would hope that these groups would do likewise.

Narlene McLaughlin left her job in 1988 as operations manager with American Heritage Life Insurance Company to work with her husband, Bishop Vaughn McLaughlin, in full-time ministry.