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Alternatives in education create a brighter future



MEREDITH CLARK

Associate Editor

It's cruel to charge an 8-year-old with the responsibility of breaking poverty's grip.

Especially when that child is stuck in a school that doesn't meet his or her needs.

But that's exactly how traditional merit-based, need-determined scholarships work: prove to us, kid, that you can overcome your family's background, and we'll give you a shot at really making progress through higher education.

The old set-up yields a few exceptions who beat their circumstances through self-determination and a few opportunities. But why not re-write the rule of excellence instead of settling for widespread mediocrity?

That can be done by parents of all incomes, including those who invest their own time and resources in improving existing public schools, and the working poor who will sacrifice to send their kids to better schools when what's offered just doesn't measure up.

It can be done by the states through the diversification of educational options and competition to create the best learning experience possible.

It can be done through the involvement of "persons" — including those created by the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*. If corporations can act as individuals pouring money into our country's future through support of political campaigns, they can act as individuals choosing to invest in the education of the nation's future, too.

From The James Madison Institute to the White House-led "Race to the Top" public education initiative, everyone is searching for ways that we can educate students through innovative, affordable, sustainable means.

In Florida, the Tax Credit Scholarship is one of them.

The scholarship, used by some 24,871 low-income students in Florida, received a boost with a bill filed by state Rep. Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, chair of the House Education Policy committee. The program gives companies in Florida a tax incentive to invest in education, and the bill has been touted by Gov. Crist as one of his top priorities this session.

To qualify, families must make no more than 200 percent of the federal poverty level (\$21,600 for a family with one child). Most recipients pay out of pocket to cover the tuition gap after the scholarship is applied — the average bill for Tax Credit-participating schools is \$6,335.

H.B. 1009, and S.B. 2126, sponsored by state Sen. Joe Negron, R-Stuart, with support from Sen. Al Lawson, D-Tallahassee, would create additional controls so that the pro-

gram does not grow unchecked, requiring periodic review as participation reaches a floating cap and limiting awards to available funds.

The bills also eliminate the "cliff drop" risk of losing the scholarship — yet allow parents to accept better-paying jobs — by ratcheting down the maximum \$3,950 award as family income grows.

The scholarship has gained bipartisan support in recent years, and it unites strange bedfellows including business-oriented legislators such as Weatherford and former Pinellas County teachers union president Doug Tuthill.

"It empowers low-income families to match their children with the right learning opportunity," Tuthill said. "It provides equal opportunity for access."

Eighty percent of recipients use the money to attend faith-based schools such as North Florida Christian and Innovation School of Excellence (affiliated with Innovation Baptist Church), which have the highest scholarship enrollment numbers in Leon County. Throughout the state, the money is used at schools with special academic and cultural thrusts that address needs with a nuanced approach, such as the Magnolia School and the Sakkara Youth Institute, both in Tallahassee.

It is not a voucher — students don't qualify according to the quality of the school in their area. Rather, the scholarship is a means of providing a way out for some of the state's poorest children.

It's not quite the laissez-faire fix that limited government proponents aim for, but it is a wise application of resources, and one of the least-applied options for school alternatives in the state.

J. Stanley Marshall, publisher of the *JMI Journal*, observed that "there is no shortage of interesting news from K-12 America, and the continuing fascination with our schools is both understandable and commendable."

He praised a program in Pakistan that created 600 village schools serving 80,000 children solely through the donations of "some wealthy Pakistanis."

We're not there yet. No one component of Florida's academic profile is the silver bullet for fixing public education. Tuthill described the Tax Credit Scholarship as one of many "silver BBs."

Train your gaze on what's ahead for schools — especially in Florida — where current legislative leaders have scrambled for federal stimulus monies to meet our own constitutional mandates on education. Through the efforts of reformers across the political spectrum, and from the homework table to the executive boardroom, we can typify an ideal in the public education diversity that is and is to come.

Contact Meredith Clark at (850) 599-2258 or mclark@tallahassee.com.