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Opinion »

Sizing up school voucher proposal



**BY BILL
HELLER**

Special to the Times

**Scholarships
for poor
children are**

**in the best tradition of
our commitment to equal
educational opportunity.**

Having spent my life in public education, I know better than most the challenge we face with children who come to school from homes where the rent is paid at the expense of food on the kitchen table. That's one reason I can't accept a form of politics that would deny poor children any reasonable learning opportunity we can give them.

In Florida, the Tax Credit Scholarship is the only program aimed specifically at giving more opportunities to children who have so few. It is solely for K-12 students whose household incomes qualify them for free or reduced lunch, and we know at this point that it is attracting the poorest and lowest-performing students. We also know these families are so desperate they will pay upward of \$1,000 to make up the difference between the \$3,950 scholarship and tuition at the 1,100 private schools the state has approved to enroll scholarship recipients.

We have 772 low-income students on the scholarship in Pinellas (77 in my district) attending a variety of private schools — including Academy Prep and Yvonne Reed

Christian School in St. Petersburg, the Palm Harbor Montessori Academy, even the venerable Admiral Farragut Academy. If you talk with the parents of these children as I have, you learn very quickly that they are not motivated by a dislike for our public schools. Quite the opposite, these are families working with educators to find solutions for some of our most vulnerable students. You also see quite clearly that this is helping to turn around some of these children's lives.

I support this program and the bill that my Republican colleague, Rep. Will Weatherford, has filed this year to strengthen its accountability and enable its continued growth. I'm not alone among Democrats. Last year, 21 of my 44 House Democratic colleagues voted to support Tax Credit Scholarships — including the majority of the Black Caucus.

The arguments against a tax credit scholarship are familiar to me. Some say the participating faith-based schools violate the constitutional separation between church and state, but a 2002 U.S. Supreme Court decision on a similar program in Cleveland found just the opposite. Some say they are not held to the same accountability standard as public schools, but the norm-referenced tests these students take are a valid measure of whether or not they are succeeding. Rep. Weatherford's current bill is an effort in the right direction in terms of seeking the greater academic and financial accountability that I want to see happen.

For those who don't know me, public education has been my life. I have a doctorate in education, taught special education, served as an education college dean and, for 10 years, was dean and CEO of

the University of South Florida St. Petersburg. Before I was elected, I helped lead a campaign in Pinellas County that persuaded voters to overwhelmingly support an increase in their property taxes for teacher salaries, improved support for reading programs, and a sustained underwriting of arts programs.

To me, a scholarship option for poor, struggling schoolchildren is in the greatest tradition of our collective commitment to equal educational opportunity. I do not feel it is anti-public school but prochild, which is what every educator, public or private, supports and values.

The parents in my district who are poor and motivated enough to pursue this scholarship are not trying to harm public education. Not at all; they're just trying to help their children. Parental involvement in these programs is very high because they have realized home and school are a partnership and a child's success depends on each partner working together. I should also note many of this county's most economically capable citizens place their children by choice in private schools while being major advocates for public schools by participating in the Pinellas Education Foundation. They truly demonstrate that one can be an advocate for both choice and public schools.

The bottom line for me has always been the child. What benefits him or her, regardless of the location or funding source, is what's right. I'll always be an advocate for doing what's right for each child, and feel this program grants me that opportunity.

Bill Heller is the state representative from District 52 representing parts of St. Petersburg, Pinellas Park and Clearwater. He is the ranking Democrat on the House Education Policy Council.