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More access to private education makes sense

Scholarship bills would benefit both students, business

By: Robert Enlow, Charles T. Evans and Brooke Terry - March 28, 2013

Private schools have been serving Texas families very well for decades. But now that state lawmakers are discussing ways to increase access to those schools for low- and middle-income families, myths about private education are being raised.

Such falsehoods mustn't get in the way of giving students the educational opportunities they deserve.

Tax-credit scholarship legislation introduced by Sens. Dan Patrick, R-Houston, and Ken Paxton, R-McKinney, and Rep. Bill Callegari, R-Houston, would allow Texas businesses to receive tax credits for donating to nonprofits that, in turn, award private school scholarships. Such a program currently is operating in 11 states, serving more than 151,000 children.

Some conservatives are concerned tax-credit scholarships would open Texas private schools up to state meddling and increased government regulations. Opponents from the left contend private schools are not accountable and should not receive any state incentive to serve Texas families.

The fear of government over-regulating a private school is legitimate but ultimately unjustified. State by state, where school choice programs exist, private schools have maintained their integrity and freely educated students who otherwise could not afford to leave the public schools that failed to meet their needs.

A Cato Institute examination of 20 school choice programs found there is no statistical difference in the level of regulation between a private school accepting scholarship students and a private school that declines to participate in a choice program. Moreover, "curriculum mandates, admission policies, price controls ... or barriers to using scholarships to attend religious schools are rare for tax-credit scholarship programs," according to research from the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice. But that reality doesn't stop the demagoguery. Also, participation in a tax-credit scholarship program is 100 percent voluntary for private schools. If a school is concerned that accepting scholarship students will detract from its mission, it can decline to participate.

To the concern about private schools being "too unregulated" or "not accountable," all three tax-credit scholarship bills being considered in Texas require that participating schools be accredited, a rigorous process by which a private school is audited and must adhere to certain requirements on governance best practices, financial transparency,

curriculum quality and staffing. Moreover, all accredited schools in Texas must annually administer a national norm-referenced test approved by the school's accrediting agency.

Schools also are accountable to parents who can leave if they become dissatisfied with a school's performance. Schools that can't meet parents' expectations go out of business. That's real accountability.

Notably, Sen. Wendy Davis, D-Fort Worth, has introduced a bill requiring private schools that accept scholarship students to administer TEA's STAAR tests. But the goal of school choice is not to make private schools look just like public schools through state-imposed curriculum and testing requirements. It's the opposite. School choice is meant to provide an array of opportunities - public and private - to students who have diverse needs and interests while improving the quality of all schools.

Indeed, 22 empirical studies have shown that when private school choice is introduced into a community, neighborhood public schools actually experience academic gains.

Decades ago, before private school choice programs existed, there was uncertainty about how school choice would impact students. Today, thanks to the experiences of 21 states, we know school choice benefits students and schools. It also saves taxpayers money.

That is probably why Alabama adopted its first private school choice program just this month - a tax-credit scholarship program for children in failing schools.

Those on the left or right shouldn't be worried about tax-credit scholarships. Rather, Texans should be troubled that it's taken this long to make such freedom available to more families.

Enlow is president and CEO, Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice. Evans is executive director, Texas Association of Non-Public Schools. Terry is a mother and advocate for educational options in Texas.