

Miami Herald Misses Key Facts and Context in School Choice Takedown

Jason Bedrick

March 14, 2014

Earlier this week, the Miami Herald editorialized against the proposed expansion of the highly popular Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program. The law allows businesses to receive tax credits for contributing to nonprofit scholarship funding organizations (SFOs) that aid low-income students to attend the school of their parents' choice. Florida's sole SFO, Step Up For Students, issued nearly 60,000 scholarships in the last year but had to turn away about 30,000 applicants.

The Herald argues the scholarship program harms public schools, helping the few at the expense of the many. Unfortunately, the Herald was apparently unaware of research showing the scholarships save money and that public school students benefit from the increased choice and competition.

The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program Saves Money

The Herald claims the money used to fund the scholarships "is money that, in effect, has been denied to the public-school system and the state's general revenue." By focusing exclusively on the reduced revenue while ignoring the corresponding reduced costs, the Herald gives a distorted and inaccurate account of the fiscal reality.

In fact, the Florida legislature's nonpartisan Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA) concluded in its 2010 analysis the scholarships saved Florida \$36.2 million in just a single year. The program decreased state revenues by \$82.2 million while reducing expenditures by \$118.4 million, which is \$1.44 in savings for every \$1 in reduced tax revenue. This year, scholarships averaged about \$4,650, which is just more than half of the total average per-pupil expenditures in Florida's public schools (according to the most recent NCES data).

Moreover, even if the program produced no savings, the Herald’s assertion that this money is “denied to the public-school system” confuses means and ends. The public schools are one means of providing an education to students, not an end in themselves. If anyone has a claim on those resources, it is the students, not the schools.

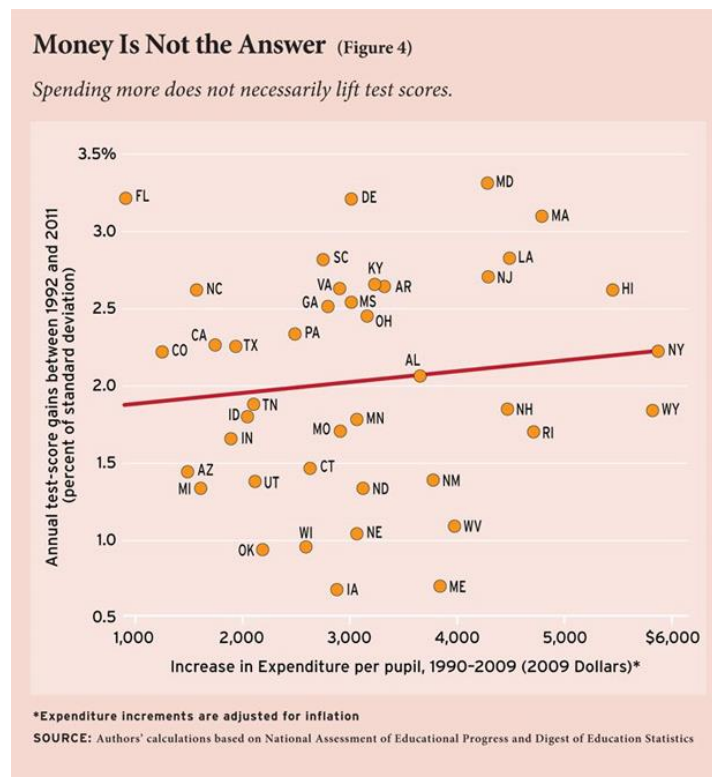
Competition Improves Public School Performance

The Herald also incorrectly claims that expanding the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program (which it confuses with government-administered vouchers) “is bad news for public-school supporters.”

Vouchers (sic) were created to allow parents unhappy with their local public schools’ performance to enroll their children in private institutions using money contributed by corporations, which then get a dollar-for-dollar tax credit; in turn, this means fewer state tax dollars collected that could have been spent to improve ailing public schools, giving parents ever more reasons to keep seeking vouchers (sic).

Here the Herald makes two incorrect assumptions.

First, the Herald wrongly assumes additional resources would improve public school performance. In fact, there’s no strong correlation between increased spending and improved performance.



Source: Education Next

Indeed, Washington, D.C. spends about \$30,000 per pupil for some of the worst schools in the nation.

Rather than harm public school students, competition actually has aided them. When parents have the option to leave, schools must respond to their needs. A study by Dr. David Figlio and Cassandra Hart confirmed that the introduction of choice and competition had a modest but statistically significant positive effect on the academic performance of public school students. In other words, though relatively few students participate in the school choice program, all students benefit, as even the Herald grudgingly admits:

Almost 10 years ago, the Editorial Board saw the increased competition as a good thing, admonishing public schools to improve the quality of education they provided. And, to a large extent, that is what happened, as school grades in many districts attest.

Parents Choose Schools for More Than Scores

That leads to the Herald's second false assumption:

As a result [of the public schools' improved performance], parents should be less inclined to pull their kids out of public schools—and the state should be less inclined to give away to private schools even more millions of dollars that could benefit state revenue.

Here, as above, the Herald wrongly assumes parents seek out private schools primarily because of their assigned public school's poor academic performance. Research shows parents care about more than test scores. In a recent survey of tax-credit scholarship families in Georgia, the Friedman Foundation found that parents consider “a variety of other factors, including student safety, class size, classroom discipline, religious education, high school completion and post-secondary success, and a greater sense of community.”

Moreover, if competition is helping to drive the improved performance, policymakers should be more inclined to expand competition. To scale back choice and competition at this point would be like an out-of-shape individual scaling back his new exercise regimen after losing a few pounds.

The Best Form of Accountability is Directly to Parents

The Herald does endorse one proposal to modify the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program, which, under the guise of “accountability,” would actually undermine it:

[Another proposal] would...require students in schools receiving vouchers (sic) to take the same standardized tests as students in public schools. This is the one proposal that makes good sense.

Unfortunately, that proposal does *not* make sense. Imposing the state test is unnecessary because private schools are already directly accountable to parents who have the option of leaving if the school fails to meet their children's needs. Additionally, all schools participating in the Florida

Tax Credit Scholarship Program already administer nationally norm-referenced tests. Parents do not lack any information that the state tests would provide.

Moreover, the Herald's proposal is counterproductive. Tests drive what is taught, when it is taught, and how it is taught. A uniform testing regimen would induce conformity and stifle the very diversity and innovation that choice is intended to promote.

Expanding Choice and Opportunity

The Miami Herald's concerns about the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program are unfounded. The program expands choice and opportunity for those students who are most in need all while saving money and fostering a healthy competition that improves public school performance.

Hopefully the Herald will consider the evidence and reach the same conclusion as the Tampa Tribune: "The Florida Tax Scholarship releases students from the limitations of ZIP codes and poverty." That's an outcome we should all support.