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Spearman: S.C. can't afford fool's gold of private school subsidies

By MOLLY M. SPEARMAN - Guest Columnist

For the seventh year in a row, the free-flowing funds from out-of-state interests are filtering through our Legislature and influencing the agenda on K-12 education. High-paid consultants are expounding the wonders of programs in Florida and Wisconsin that give dollar-for-dollar tax credits to entice students from public schools. They claim that this “competition” has caused tremendous gains in student achievement.

So, I picked up the phone last week and called the Office of Testing at the Florida Department of Education and asked: “To what do you attribute the improvement made by Florida’s students in reading over the past few years?” Quickly, the person responded, “a state-wide comprehensive reading plan, intensive professional development for principals and teachers, reading intervention, more time on task for students, reading coaches” Get the picture? No mention was made of vouchers or tax credits. And here we are in South Carolina cutting those very programs while considering a plan to commit \$400 million to a program that has no research-based support that is works.

Appearing before a Senate panel recently, Adam Schaeffer, a paid consultant from the Virginia-based Cato Institute, claimed his group wants to “help poor students in ‘failing’ schools who have no choice but to attend public schools.” But as Schaeffer has made clear elsewhere, what he and the Cato Institute really want is to “get control of education, wipe out your tax liability, so that you owe the state nothing.” (See Adam Schaeffer, Youtube Dec. 27, 2010).

Motivation aside, would students in rural South Carolina who are at-risk actually be accepted in private schools? I visited the websites of the private schools along the I-95 corridor. There are about 50 schools, and only 35 of them are accredited by the S.C. Independent School Association or the S.C. Christian School Association. Each of these schools requires an entrance admission test. Some state that they serve only “average or above average students.” Some require a statement of “a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.” Others conduct entrance interviews with parents and students so that an admissions committee can “determine the authenticity of personal testimonies of faith.” As a Christian and an American, I defend the rights and liberties of any faith-based school to set requirements for admission, and of parents to choose that school. However, I seriously doubt that these schools will accept the very students whom the tax-credit legislation purports to help.

Finally, supporters argue that providing tax credits to parents who send their children to private schools would represent a “savings” to South Carolina. They define “savings” in the legislation as “equal to the amount of the student-based per-pupil state funding to each district less the value of tax credits taken” and tax-supported scholarships given. Well ... that *would* actually produce a savings if all the students leave from the same class or the same school; then, a district could hire fewer teachers. The problem is, that’s not how it happens. The exodus might cause a class size to change by one or two students, but the teacher still has to be there, and the lights and heat still have to be turned on in the classroom.

Supporters get around the fact that tax credits don’t help poor children, whose parents don’t pay enough in income taxes to take advantage of the credit, by encouraging the creation of private, tax-supported scholarships. The tax support comes from allowing businesses and citizens to direct their taxes to these scholarship funds. Of course this “gift” is not really a gift. If you want to give and actually help, give generously to after-school programs, reading interventions ... things that have worked in Florida and communities across this great country.

More importantly, South Carolina faces a \$700 million deficit. The current level of basic state funding for students has fallen to nearly half of what our law requires. Our charter schools and traditional school districts are struggling to exist. State agencies are cutting basic safety and health services. Our roads are filled with pot holes. We are falling behind our neighbors in North Carolina and Georgia. We cannot gamble on this legislation.

Ms. Spearman is a former teacher and legislator who serves as executive director of the S.C. Association of School Administrators