

## Can't-miss opportunity

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As with MCAS standards Massachusetts can't afford to lose ground in the area of educational innovation, either. And we can look to Florida for ideas for providing low-income families with school alternatives.

As the Cato Institute's Adam B. Schaeffer detailed in the Wall Street Journal on Friday, Florida Gov. Charlie Crist indeed caved to the special interests when he vetoed a reform bill that sought to end teacher tenure and establish merit pay. But he wisely agreed to expand Florida's Tax Credit Scholarship Program.

The program provides tax credits to corporations, in return for voluntary donations that fund private school scholarships for low-income kids. A participating company can earn a dollar-for-dollar credit of up to 75 percent of its state income tax liability.

The scholarships are similar to private school vouchers, though they are distributed by nonprofit organizations. Of course the state ultimately "pays" through the tax credits - but in Florida, as Schaeffer notes, the numbers prove it's worth the expense.

Consider that in the current school year the scholarships are worth \$3,950 for a student's private school tuition and fees. But Florida spends, on average, more than \$11,000 on a student enrolled in public school.

And the fact is at the heart of the program is the expansion of opportunity. This year more than 27,000 low-income Florida kids had the same luxury of choosing a better school as the wealthy kids. Since the program began in 2002 participation has nearly doubled.

It's true that Massachusetts lawmakers had a tough time even agreeing to the least controversial reforms in last year's education reform bill, including a simple lifting of the charter school cap. And those are public schools.

But policy-makers in Rhode Island have seen the wisdom in providing such alternatives to families who can't afford them, enacting a mini-version of Florida's scholarship tax credits. Several other states have done so too - with bipartisan support.

We should be in on this.

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