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What Florida school choice means to me

By Hera Varmah,

All Florida families with children in grades K-12 are now eligible to receive a state scholarship to find the best education setting for their kids – the kind that made a huge impact on my life, and the lives of my siblings.

I am one of 12 children whose parents are immigrants from Liberia and Jamaica, and in my assigned public school, I was a failing, unmotivated student. I never thought that I would go to college, and thus I would end up just like my parents in poverty. This was the life I envisioned for myself.

Everything changed when my parents enrolled me in Academy Prep Center of Tampa, a private, nonprofit middle school where three of my siblings were already attending. Its rigorous college-track curriculum proved to be the challenge that I needed. With the help of several teachers and their personalized instruction, I thrived in my new environment.

I then went on to Tampa Catholic High School, where I again successfully met high expectations. After graduating in 2017, I went on to earn a bachelor's degree in food science and technology from Florida A&M University in Tallahassee.

My family has four college graduates: two engineers, a medical school student, and myself, now working to provide school choice to every family in this country. I also have four siblings currently attending universities, two on their way, and two still in high school.

None of that would have been possible without the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship for lower-income students, which allowed my parents to send us to private schools they otherwise could not have afforded, and which best met our educational needs.

Our family's experience with Florida's education choice scholarships is not unique. Surveys have consistently shown that 90 percent of parents say they are satisfied with their child's scholarship.

Research suggests why. A study by the Urban Institute found students receiving the tax credit scholarship are up to 43 percent more likely than their public school peers to attend four-year colleges, and up to 20 percent more likely to earn bachelor's degrees. The effects increase the longer students stay on the scholarship – after four or more years,

they are up to 99 percent more likely to attend four-year colleges, and up to 45 percent more likely to earn bachelor's degrees.

This year, the Florida Legislature passed HB 1, and Gov. Ron DeSantis signed it into law shortly after. I was proud to speak at the bill signing for this law, which significantly expanded the scope of the tax credit scholarship and the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Educational Options (FES-EO).

The new law removes the income caps on those two programs, meaning that every K-12 family is eligible to apply regardless of their household income. However, funding priority will still be given first to those who make up to 185 percent of the federal poverty level, followed by those who make up to 400 percent of the line.

In addition, those two scholarship programs have been transformed into education savings accounts, or ESAs. That means families will be able to spend their scholarship funds on approved educational items beyond private school tuition, such as digital materials and internet resources, curriculum, tutoring, and fees for various exams.

The new law also extends FTC eligibility to students who are not enrolled full time in private or public schools. They would participate under a "personalized education program," or PEP.

PEP will allow families to purchase instructional materials, pay for part-time tuition at public or private schools, and pay tuition and fees in home education instructional programs.

These changes enable families to customize their children's education, finding the right learning environment, materials and services that best meet their individual needs.

Florida education choice scholarships gave me and my siblings something we previously lacked – opportunity. The personal instruction and challenging curriculum we received at the private school of our choice inspired and motivated us, and ultimately lifted us out of poverty and put us on the road to success.

Now, with the new law, families will have even more options to guide their children's education.