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How I Learned Not to Hate School

Florida's tax-credit scholarship program saved me. So why are teachers trying to kill it?

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By the time I was in the fourth grade, I had been held back twice, disliked school, and honestly believed I'd end up a high-school dropout. Instead, three months ago, I earned a bachelor's degree from the University of West Florida in interdisciplinary social science with a

minor in juvenile justice. I am the first member of my family to go to college, let alone graduate. But this didn't happen by chance, or by hard work alone. It happened because I was given an opportunity.

The difference maker was a scholarship that allowed me to go to a secondary school that was the right fit for me. I was lucky to be raised in Florida, home to the nation's largest tax-credit scholarship program, a "voucher" program that helps parents pay for private schools. Here's the cool part: The scholarships are financed entirely by charitable contributions, which are offset by tax credits. So public funds are never touched. The program is serving 67,000 students this fall. Like me, all come from low-income homes. Most are black or Hispanic. And the evidence from rigorous studies shows that, like me, most of them were failing in public schools but are thriving in private schools.

Despite these facts, last month the Florida School Boards Association and the state's teachers unions filed a lawsuit to kill the tax-credit scholarship program. Should the suit succeed, nearly all the 67,000 low-income students in the program will no longer be able to afford their schools. Most will be forced to attend the same public schools that failed them in the past. Although 40% of Florida's K-12 students are now enrolled in something other than zoned schools—in magnet schools, for instance, or career academies—the only program the state's unions and school boards are trying to eliminate is the one reserved for low-income students.

Florida leads the nation when it comes to how well low-income fourth-graders can read. Yet being No. 1 still means that only 27% are proficient. I don't know why anyone would want to end anything that can better those numbers. But I

would hope people who care about disadvantaged children would pause to hear stories like mine.

I grew up with my biological mother and we moved around constantly. This really took a toll on my grades—Ds and Fs were the norm. My poor grades and the fact that I was two years older than most of my classmates angered and embarrassed me. I was "disruptive" and fought with other students. Teachers tried to help, but nothing they did seemed to work. I felt no matter how hard I tried, the results would be the same. Learning became a nightmare—a punishment for being a child.

In the sixth grade I began living with my godmother, who thought it was important that I change schools. She knew of a local private school with an excellent reputation, Esprit de Corps Center for Learning in Jacksonville, Fla., but we couldn't afford the \$5,200 annual tuition. That's when a friend told her about Florida's tax-credit scholarship program, which enabled me to attend Esprit de Corps—and changed my life.

At Esprit de Corps, making honor roll is expected and academic success is celebrated. This environment was very different for me. But something clicked. My grades and self-confidence rose. I believed I could succeed and people there believed the same. Learning was no longer a nightmare, but a gift I greatly appreciated. I worked hard. In the end, I graduated with honors.

And yet, that's not the end. A different school didn't just make dreams come true for me. It allowed me to have dreams I didn't know I could have. Last summer, after graduating from the University of West Florida, I volunteered at an orphanage in the Dominican Republic, where I learned firsthand about that country's social-welfare system. This spring, I plan to continue my education at the University of South Florida, in its joint master's program in social work and public health.

I'm not sure which professional road I will take. I have options now. But whatever it is, I know I want to create opportunities for children to have a shot at a bright future. Just like I had.