

Scholarships offer lifeline to Pa. students

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By James Paul

Last summer, 5-year-old Kaiden Myers was preparing to enter kindergarten, but his mother, Marpessa, had more to worry about than what to pack for lunch.

The local Head Start program was fully enrolled, and their nearby Philadelphia public school was known for poor academics. Marpessa called and visited the district offices several times to learn if Kaiden had other schooling options, but officials were unresponsive.

Worried for her son's academic future, Marpessa decided to pursue private school. She managed to enroll Kaiden in the Westwood School in Philadelphia, which provided a terrific education. Paying tuition, however, quickly became a problem - even with the help of relatives. After one year of scraping together enough money, Marpessa realized she could not afford a second year.

Just as Marpessa began to lose hope, she was thrown a lifeline by African Americans for Educational Opportunities (AAEO).

AAEO is a nonprofit that gives scholarships - provided through local business donations - to low-income families seeking educational options. It awarded Kaiden a scholarship to attend first grade at the Westwood School, with the help of Pennsylvania's Educational Improvement Tax Credit (EITC) program.

Since its 2001 launch as the first scholarship tax credit program in the country, the EITC has grown to serve more than 60,000 students. Lawmakers recently added a separate component, the Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit (OSTC), which grants scholarships to students in the lowest-performing 15 percent of Pennsylvania public schools.

Here's how the EITC works:

Businesses make donations to registered, vetted, and approved charities that award scholarships. The business receives a tax credit worth 75 percent of the donation, while the scholarship organization uses the money to help low- and middle-income children - like Kaiden - escape from chronically failing schools.

This week, the Pennsylvania House passed a bill that would make it easier for businesses to take advantage of these tax credit scholarship programs.

Thanks to his scholarship from AAEO, Kaiden is flourishing academically. He tests above grade level in both math and reading. He is learning how to use computers and Smart-Boards, and, most importantly, he gets personal attention in a safe learning environment.

"The schools in our area would not have provided the jump start he needed," Marpessa said. "At a public school he would have been just a number. The Westwood School knows his name."

The scholarship tax credit programs are best known for opening doors to families in need. But the EITC and OSTC are also beneficial to taxpayers throughout the state, since they educate students at a fraction of the cost to taxpayers of traditional public schools. The average K-12 scholarship awarded through the EITC is a shade over \$1,000, which is dwarfed by the \$14,600 per-pupil average in Pennsylvania's public schools. These minimal scholarships are often the difference that allows a family to afford tuition at private schools.

Consider that in 2012-13, the EITC and OSTC awarded scholarships to twice the number of students enrolled in Pittsburgh public schools for one-seventh of the cost. Similarly, the 60,000 scholarship recipients would comprise 43 percent of student enrollment in Philadelphia - but only cost 3.4 percent of the district's budget.

Rare is the public policy that saves money and produces better outcomes. Yet the EITC and OSTC manage to achieve both.

Another indicator of the EITC's success is the insatiable demand for scholarships, which, unfortunately, far exceeds what is available. Over the past decade, the Children's Scholarship Fund Philadelphia received an incredible 130,000 applications for only 14,500 scholarships.

Families across the commonwealth are desperate for more choices when it comes to education. Far too many students remain trapped - through no fault of their own - in persistently failing and often dangerous public schools. Should a student's zip code condemn him or her to a subpar education?

The EITC has afforded tens of thousands of lifeboats to the students who need them most. But this is no time to slow down. The story of Kaiden Myers should become the rule, not the exception.

Even one child on a waiting list for a life-changing scholarship is one child too many.

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http://www.philly.com/philly/opinion/inquirer/20141010_Scholarships_offer_lifeline_to_Pa_students.html#vzIZ7KPqY6zsmeeH.99