



A Polk Perspective: School choice scholarships help students like me



Ashley Elliott

I was born drug-addicted. I grew up poor with a single mother.

I was destined to become a high school dropout, a teen mom, or worse.

But I'm not any of those things. Instead, I'm completing my first year at Valencia College in Orlando, and I have my sights set on becoming a teacher.

For that, I can thank incredible teachers, and an opportunity to go to a school that worked best for me. I wouldn't have had that chance had it not been for a Florida Tax Credit Scholarship for lower-income students.

I wanted to tell a bit about myself in response to a story about school choice scholarships that ran on the front page of the Ledger, "School voucher program growing" [April 1].

The article never mentioned the average scholarship student lives in a household earning around \$25,000 a year, that two-thirds of the students are black or Hispanic, or that more than half the students live in single-parent homes.

More importantly, lost among all the stats said and unsaid, were stories about the 100,000 scholarship students who benefit, including nearly 3,700 in Polk County.

Students like me.

If it wasn't for my grandmother, a

public-school teacher, an administrator and a scholarship to a private school, I wouldn't be in college today.

Before I got a tax credit scholarship, I was your typical troubled teen.

I got in fights, was bullied for having to wear the same clothes twice in a single week, and barely scraped by with a 2.1 GPA.

Aside from a lack of new clothing and hunger, poverty brought on other stresses which made school difficult.

On one side of my school notebook would be my homework. On the back, calculations for grocery shopping to be sure I didn't exceed the balance of our food stamp card each month.

Difficulties mounted in school and at home until I was sent to an alternative high school for troubled students. It was the type of school students like me begged to stay at longer so we wouldn't have to face the tough reality back home.

It was at this last chance public high school where I met Ms. Perez and Mr. Thomas. My life began to turn around with their help. After my 10th-grade year they encouraged me to apply for the tax credit scholarship and enroll in Victory Christian Academy in Lakeland.

At Victory, my academics turned around for good, bullying and fights came to an end, my social life improved, as did my self-confidence.

To my surprise the student body was diverse and the school culture accepting. It felt like we were all part of one big team.

I graduated Victory with a 3.3 GPA and enrolled in Valencia College. Now I dream of finishing my education at the University of Central Florida and becoming a teacher, just like the ones who inspired me.

I'm not the only student to bounce back from bullying or poverty, thanks to this scholarship.

Last fall the Urban Institute released a first-of-its-kind study on the long-term effects of the tax credit scholarship. Researchers found scholarship students were up to 43 percent more likely to enroll in college than their peers in public schools and up to 29 percent more likely to earn an associate's degree.

Getting out of poverty is not possible without education. At both public and private schools I had dedicated educators, but it was at the private school where I thrived. Learning is not so black and white, and different students need different environments to succeed.

When it comes to educating disadvantaged students, adults need to stop fighting for control. This is not about money, or taking away from the public schools. This is about education. It is not a competition, it is a struggle for equity and equality — and we should be on the same team.

Ashley Elliott is a former tax-credit scholarship recipient from Lakeland, a graduate of Victory Christian Academy and a student at Valencia College in Orlando.