

# TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

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## Hope Scholarship gives bullied kids a way out

By Alyson Hochstedler



It is difficult to read Ms. Wood's opinion on the Hope Scholarship in light of our experience. For three school years, our son, Gant, endured bullying at the hands of multiple children.

He was put in a head lock and slammed into lockers, cornered with pinking shears to his stomach, slapped in the

face, punched and then told he would be strangled to death for telling. At one point, Gant was huddled in the living room holding his knees refusing to go to school.

He fought severe anxiety and we sought counseling where we were told he had symptoms of PTSD. Each day was an exercise in coaxing our son back into a place where he continued to have to go to class with the boys who tormented him.

Our school was A rated and had a Zero Bullying Tolerance policy. Supporting options doesn't mean you are against public schools. Leon County Schools worked great for my eldest daughter. She graduated without a problem. But the situation was different for Gant.

We followed the structure in place, first going to the teacher, the guidance counselor, the administration and then to the County level. We were told the school may not be the right fit for our son — who never once initiated or retaliated. We were told that our son's case did not meet the District guideline

for bullying because it was not one child on one child.

HB 1 would have been an answer for us! We were offered for Gant to attend another district public school, but as a single mom with four other kids in school, we could not accommodate another school farther away. The answer for us was a local private school, yet I could not afford the tuition.

Thankfully, he is in private school due to the help of a Tax Credit Scholarship, an option available for low-income families in Florida. Understand, though, that we have to make up the percentage not covered, continue to pay our taxes for a public school system that failed him, and struggle financially due to the lack of enforcement of policies in place.

Critics like Ms. Wood argue that preventing bullying, and escaping bullying with the Hope Scholarship, are mutually exclusive solutions. They are not.

It is my hope that critics of HB1 will listen. Some may misunderstand the depth of the trauma. Removing a child from the place where the trauma occurred isn't always another traumatic event. Gant did not feel safe — not just because of the bullies, but because those responsible for his care had failed him too many times for him to trust them and the school. Leaving was not the hardship, but paying for the hope of a safe, academic learning environment is.

The Hope Scholarship is about giving bullied kids a way out, and a way to afford that way out if it is a private school.

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