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Op-Ed

Ex-public school lobbyist in NC journeys from critic to supporter of choice

By Brian Lewis

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From 2008 to 2013, I was the front line of defense against all proposals before the General Assembly that would privatize public education, including tax credits for students with special needs, opportunity scholarships for children living in poverty and charter school expansion.

I opposed all efforts to "drain funds from public schools," especially for private schools that I described as "unaccountable" and "scams" for the North Carolina taxpayer and the children they served.

Then life happened.

In December, my daughter enrolled in a private school in Raleigh, a heart-wrenching decision our family made after six great years in public schools. This past fall, Isabel found herself in a middle school environment for which she was unprepared and ill-suited. She was sinking in a new setting nearly void of the nurturing teacher-student relationships we enjoyed a year ago.

From the start, we advocated within the system for Isabel through emails, teacher conferences and calls with administrators. Eventually, testing accommodations were made. Still, Isabel was slipping away. She dreaded school, we dreaded school, and it was clear the teachers dreaded it, too. We hit the wall in November and came to the conclusion that public middle school was not the answer. In fact, it was the problem.

We found a small private school that emphasized music and foreign language in its K-8 curriculum. Class size averaged six students to one teacher, which supported the school's philosophy that each child requires a learning plan that fits his or her particular needs and strengths and that no child should ever face a choice between achieving and failure.

Today, Isabel is the child we know from elementary school. She joyfully attends school where she has quality teachers (mainly former public school teachers who want to teach rather than serve as standardized test proctors) who pull out Isabel's strengths in learning, including her love of writing and art.

This experience is not only about my daughter's education. It has become my education. I can afford this option for my daughter, but what about the thousands of families, unlike me, who

cannot afford tuition to send their child to a private school? Don't their daughters' struggles count, too?

The answer is they should. Sadly, if I hadn't had this very personal challenge, I could still be on the opposite side of the private school doors trying to keep them shut to parents who desperately need this option.

I recall prior "off-the-record" conversations I had with Darrell Allison, president of Parents for Educational Freedom in North Carolina. He said to me one time: "Brian, all too often the debate around parental school choice from many of our elected officials and even our courts is what we are to do for those children educationally; however, the debate would shift dramatically when those same leaders had to wrestle with what they would do if it was their child."

He's right.

It is about my child, and your child, and children all across this state who deserve the best we can give, just as private school was the best Isabel's mother and I could give her.

This experience has changed me, and I want it to better shape the dialogue about school choice in North Carolina. It's not just our state's poor and underachieving schools where kids are being left behind. It's in every school in North Carolina, because sometimes public schools are not a good fit for all students.

So after an education like I've never had before, I am re-entering the debate, still an avid believer in our public schools but a supporter of school choice, including opportunity scholarships, and public charter schools.

Brian Lewis is the former chief lobbyist for the N.C. Association of Educators.