

Opinion: Ga. students, parents need school choice

Speaker Pro Tempore Jan Jones writes about providing parents with more educational opportunities for their children:

A friend and her husband jumped into action when they noticed their oldest child, a first-grader, struggling academically. At their own expense (and the cost in metro Atlanta is several thousand dollars), they had him screened by a psychologist, who diagnosed the boy with dyslexia.

My friend began where most parents do: Asking the public school her child attended for extra services. Despite his diagnosis by a professional and academic scores coming in at the 11th percentile, the school said his scores weren't low enough to qualify. Seeking a workable solution, she asked to hold him back at the end of the year and repeat first grade to give him time to mature and get professional therapy that they would pay for out of pocket. Again the school said no.

These parents knew that going along with the school's plan, or lack thereof, would lead to academic failure, falling behind and loss of confidence. We know because we see it happen to dyslexic kids all the time, especially the vast majority who are never diagnosed because the testing costs so much.

Determined to do whatever it took to give their son a chance to succeed, my friend and her husband removed him from his public school and changed her shifts as a nurse to overnights so that she could homeschool her son during the day when her husband was at work as a police officer. With two younger children at home as well, this move came at tremendous personal sacrifice.

Because this family lives in Florida, a state with a strong parent choice law, they received \$8,000 that could go toward curriculum and intensive therapy that caters to the needs of dyslexic students and get them on the path to mainstreaming back into regular schools.

Tens of thousands of Georgia families have the same or similar struggles with a local public school that isn't the right fit for their child needs. This is no blanket condemnation of Georgia public schools, many of which are excellent and led by incredible teachers who change lives every day. All of my children attended public schools and public universities, as did I.

More than 90 percent of Georgia's children go to public schools, and I've proudly led on budgets that fully fund public schools and have increased teacher pay by about \$10,000 over the past 7 years.

But that doesn't change the fact that some families would benefit from options, particularly the households that can't afford to pay out of pocket for private schools, therapy or tutoring.

This year, I'm supporting legislation in the Georgia House that takes a first step toward empowering parents. SB 233 came close to passage last year and I'm committed to doing

everything I can to see it get to the desk of Gov. Brian Kemp, a strong supporter of the legislation.

This bill would give certain Georgia families -- those whose local public school is in the lowest-performing 25 percent in the state -- \$6,500 to put toward private school tuition. Counties that don't have any schools in this category won't be affected at all, but for children trapped in underperforming schools, the Promise Scholarship could prove life-changing.

Critics of the law say the program takes money away from public schools, but it actually is a net benefit: While the local school districts won't receive state tax dollars for students who aren't enrolled there, they'll still get the same amount from local property tax dollars, which means more funding per student.

President Joe Biden's Education Secretary Miguel Cardoza recently came to Atlanta and told news media that parent choice programs will destroy public schools. Such rhetoric might work if we didn't already have data proving him wrong. As my friend's example attests, Florida's law applies universally -- far beyond what we're considering in Georgia -- with no collapse of public schools. What we've seen there is that newly empowered parents are now fierce advocates for protecting the program that has given their children new opportunities.

I want those opportunities for Georgia's kids and I'm thrilled that we're starting with the children who need options the most. It's time for Georgia to catch up with its pioneering neighbors and let tax dollars follow the child, not systems that are failing them.

Rep. Jan Jones, R-Milton, is speaker pro tem of the Georgia House of Representatives.