

# The Augusta Chronicle

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## Choice on education reform

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Guest Columnist  
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With the 2008 passage of the Georgia Education Expense Credit Law (House Bill 1133), Georgia became a national leader in providing parents with more choices for the education of their children. Since then, more than 10,000 Georgia citizens have redirected a portion of their tax dollars to fund scholarships for more than 3,000 families desperate to secure a better education for their children than the one provided by their local public schools.

The popularity of this educational choice initiative among parents is very understandable. According to the Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males 2010, the national graduation rate for black males in 2008 was 47 percent, and 40 percent in Georgia. Meanwhile, private-school graduation rates for black males during that same time period was more than double the national rate, at 98 percent.

**UNDER H.B. 1133**, individuals can take a tax credit -- not a mere deduction -- against their Georgia income taxes for scholarship contributions of up to \$1,000 in any year. Married couples are eligible for a \$2,500 credit. Also, "C" corporations can redirect up to 75 percent of their Georgia income taxes for a corresponding credit. The statewide cap on the program is \$50 million, a figure that represents only .3 percent of the state's education budget.

The positions of Georgia's two leading candidates for governor are clear. Although he also supports public education reforms, Nathan Deal supports H.B. 1133 and favors an increase in the annual tax credit cap. Roy Barnes wants to repeal H.B. 1133.

Since 2001, fueled by the generosity of the Augusta community, Heritage Academy has been providing educational opportunities in the name of Christ to low- and moderate-income families with outstanding results. The majority of our recent graduates now attend private preparatory schools and the two magnet schools in Richmond County.

While all of our students are on need-based scholarships, 64 of the 175 Augusta-area students who are receiving H.B. 1133 scholarships attend Heritage. The median income

of those families is \$17,000, and 75 percent of the scholarship recipient families make less than \$25,000. Each of those families pays tuition scaled to their income.

**BECAUSE THE AVERAGE** amount of most scholarships awarded to date has been less than the amount the state spends on each student attending public schools, when a public school student uses a scholarship to transfer to a private school, the state actually saves money.

We have yet to take into account the savings to the state when more students graduate from high school and become responsible taxpayers. In a new video available on the website of the Georgia GOAL Scholarship Program, the state's largest student scholarship organization, the legendary University of Georgia football coach Vince Dooley -- himself an H.B. 1133 contributor -- rightly refers to this program as a win-win situation for scholarship families and Georgia taxpayers. We at Heritage Academy could not agree more.

**(The writer is executive director and founder of Heritage Academy in Augusta.)**