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Supreme Court gives hope where lawmakers failed

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The U.S. Supreme Court last week threw a lifeline to our country's youngest inmates, offering troubled children a shot at redemption if they are willing to turn their lives around.

That decision should be a wake-up call to the Florida Legislature, which so far has discarded these lives as easily as it does our tax dollars.

Here is the dilemma the high court decided: If a child under the age of 18 commits a crime other than murder, should he or she spend the rest of their lives in prison without possibility of parole?

The answer seems to be a no-brainer.

How many of us have known individuals, perhaps even ourselves, who made bad decisions earlier in life? And how many managed to seize on second chances to change those ways for the better?

This year I sponsored legislation that would have given child offenders that second chance. The legislation would have provided a new parole process for certain pre-qualified offenders who were 15 years or younger at the time a crime was committed and were sentenced to life or to a cumulative term of 10 years or more.

According to research conducted by Florida State University's Public Interest Law Center, Florida judges have sentenced more juveniles than any other state to life in prison without parole for crimes other than murder.

Make no mistake. This legislation was not about giving juvenile criminals who had committed heinous crimes a get-out-of-jail-free card. The process was designed to function under very specific guidelines, including having served a minimum eight-year sentence prior to even becoming eligible for paroled release, and completed their GED.

In addition, anyone who had priors such as murder or kidnapping would automatically be disqualified.

The savings to taxpayers are significant. By 2008, the average cost to house a male youthful offender exceeded \$23,000 annually.

Despite this, the bill was rejected by both the Senate and House.

Fortunately, the Legislature's lack of compassion was overcome by the wisdom of the nine-member U.S. Supreme Court.

Last week's 6-3 decision declared that life without possibility of parole for a crime committed by someone under 18 is cruel and unusual punishment.

I intend to re-file my bill next year and give the Legislature a second chance to do the right thing. Let's hope they grab it this time.