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**Florida's school voucher program initiative in 2002 was defeated. Should Florida have a school voucher program?**

Florida, under the direction of Jeb Bush, implemented one of the most unfair “education programs” ever imposed upon the citizens of our state – the School Voucher Program. Studies show these programs to be of little educational value to our children and rife with mismanagement by the state Department of Education.

School voucher proponents held a rally of about 2,000 private school administrators, parents and students at the state capitol to highlight the benefits private schools have over public schools. Actual testimonies from these participants stated that the overriding benefits of moving to a private school was class size and avoidance of the FCAT. One mother testified that her daughter failed the third-grade FCAT and was going to be held back. She received a voucher and moved her daughter into fourth grade in a private school.

These testimonies identify the tip-of-the-iceberg of the blatant unfairness of Florida’s School Voucher Program. Public schools are being harassed to improve by both the state and federal governments with little funding being provided for improvement. Yet these same rules do not apply to private schools supported by the voucher program. The class size amendment benefits are clearly recognized by everyone; however, it is not funded, and in fact money is being wasted by Jeb Bush’s administration trying to repel this amendment. Additionally, private schools are not being required to provide safe schools, hire certified teachers, be accredited by the state or follow the same testing requirements as public schools. They are not even required to be financially stable; in fact some of the new private schools trying to take advantage of the windfall voucher program have already declared bankruptcy and closed, creating an educational nightmare for these students.

Because the Florida Department of Education does not require voucher students to take it’s battery of standardized tests once they move to a private school, it will be impossible to determine if the private school provides the student with a better or worse education than the public school. This is not only unfair to parents and students, it is critical information needed to determine the success or failure of the new private school and ultimately the School Voucher Program. We require public schools and teachers to be accountable and we agree that they should be, yet this administration requires no

accountability from private schools or the School Voucher Program. According to Ron Klein, state senator from Delray Beach, “This program was intentionally set up without state oversight”. Why? This invites fraud and abuse.

William Bennett, former Secretary of Education under Ronald Reagan, obtained a major educational contract for vouchers to run a “virtual school” for children that did not attend public school last year. This is in direct violation of the laws set up to govern school vouchers. According to GOP sources, John Kirtley, a Tampa venture capitalist, gave Republicans \$100,000 in campaign contributions in 2000 for the express purpose of pushing the new Corporate Tax Credit voucher program. Mr. Kirtley is now in charge of four scholarship funding organizations (SFO) in our state.

SFOs are registered charities that solicit money from corporations for school vouchers. The corporation then gets a full tax credit for the contribution. The SFOs decide which children get vouchers. Because of the deliberate lack of oversight, the state does not know who the students are, who the schools are, whether the teachers are certified or what courses are being taught. One such SFO, Silver Archer, is currently under criminal investigation for possible misuse of scholarship funds and other SFO violations.

The ultimate insult to our public school parents was provided by Mr. Jim Horne, Florida’s commissioner of education, when he stated that “Fundamental accountability in (voucher) programs rests with the parent.” Yet, he constantly increases accountability pressure on public school parents and teachers. Does he actually believe private school parents are more trustworthy than public school parents?

While voucher research results done to determine the educational benefit of vouchers for Milwaukee and Cleveland students vary greatly. There is no clear indication that children attending private schools under the voucher program obtained a better or a worse education. However, parents of voucher students generally believed their children were being better educated simply because they were attending private schools.

Democrats believe a safe, stable, educational experience coupled with excellent teachers and adequate facilities should be available for all children. Full accountability of all our academic institutions is needed to achieve this goal. However, we are deeply disturbed by the school voucher program implemented by this administration. This program takes a shallow view of our citizens, is financially and administratively unaccountable, and is grossly unfair to our public schools and students. It should be eliminated.