

# Ideas in Action

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*The issue of whether or not to offer vouchers as an option in Florida's public education system continues to be a controversial topic. It is important that taxpayers, particularly those who support school children, are aware of the reality associated with vouchers—what their imposition would mean to our schools, either as an asset or a liability.*

*To achieve this clarity, Florida TaxWatch invited representatives of Florida Teaching Profession/National Education Association (FTP-NEA), Florida Education Association (FEA) United and the Florida Association of District School Superintendents to submit an article explaining the merits or drawbacks of school vouchers in Florida. Although TaxWatch did not receive a response from the Association of Superintendents, the two teachers unions have offered the following articles expressing their positions on this many faceted public debate.*

## Vouchers, An Asset or a Liability?

by: John Ryor, Executive Director,  
FTP-NEA

Let's begin by acknowledging an important fact. Our schools need improving. Many of Florida's children are getting less of an education than they deserve or a highly competitive global economy requires. **Public schools must provide an education good enough to create opportunities for our students in a rapidly changing world. That's what all Floridians, parents, teachers and business leaders want for each child. That is what members of the Florida Teaching Profession-NEA want. So how do we turn public education around to meet today's challenges? That is the question we should be answering.**

Some proposed strategies for reform focus on narrow economic or ideological agendas rather than concern for the "Common Good," a basic tenet of public education and certainly of our republic. Such strategies tend to be divisive and in the long run distract us from achieving solutions which serve the larger community and ultimately provide better education for all children, rich and poor alike.

Vouchers for private schools are an example of a narrow strategy which will either raise taxes dramatically or aggravate an already shrinking financial commitment  
*please see RYOR, page 2*

## The Hidden Cost of School Vouchers

by: Pat L. Tornillo, Jr., President,  
Florida Education Association/United

School vouchers are the latest in a series of fads to strike a chord in the minds of some education reformers. Unfortunately, some parents are being duped into believing that those who are pushing this radical idea are looking out for the good of our children.

Instead, we find that the leading advocates of vouchers are more likely to be profit-oriented entrepreneurs who see an \$11 billion pot of cash -- the amount currently spent on public education in Florida -- and they are using our children in an attempt to get at those funds.

Voucher advocates claim that children of low-income parents would benefit greatly because vouchers would afford them the same choices enjoyed by more advantaged parents and children. They further insist that vouchers would lead to increased competition among schools. The competition, they argue, would force all schools to improve. The problem with this panacea is that there is no evidence to substantiate any of these lofty claims. By contrast, there is ample evidence to show that vouchers would hurt the disadvantaged most and increase the cost of education for everyone.

*please see TORNILLO, page 3*

to our public schools. While vouchers are sold under the mantle of "choice" for parents and students, experience demonstrates that the real choices lie with private school admission officers. But worst of all, vouchers hold no real hope of addressing the learning needs of students currently being shortchanged. Public education is education we share...we share its costs, we share its mission, we share its accountability. Private education has its own accountability, its own mission (religious, economic or class) and should bear its own costs. We will create more responsive and more effective public schools when we stop shortchanging our children. Consider these facts:

- The State of Florida is spending 10% fewer General Revenue dollars on public education than it did in 1990.
- In real dollars, per pupil spending is down by \$200 since 1990.
- With a growth rate of over 60,000 new students a year for the last decade and little money for construction, schools have become overcrowded and each child has received less attention.
- Lottery money promised for supplementary programs has been used as a cover to divert General Revenue funds from schools to other state programs.

All over Florida, teachers have been asked to adapt to more and more children and fewer and fewer supplies. If the goal is to provide each child with an education for productive citizenship in a changing world, then vouchers hold no potential for achieving that end. If we are to create better schools for all children and equal educational opportunity for each child, then we must fix schools where they are. We must engage parents, educators, business people, and the clergy in the pursuit of the larger community interest.

**Teachers, parents and supporters of public schools can unite around specific and proven strategies.**

**Re-emphasizing the basics:** That means being able to read with comprehension in all disciplines -- literature, history, geography, science and the arts. That means being able to write and communicate clearly with correct use of language. That also means having an understanding of mathematics, which gives the student an ability to solve problems. And that emphasis on basics can be achieved with smaller schools, smaller class sizes and more individual attention.

**Providing safe, orderly schools:** Teaching and learning cannot proceed in an environment marked by violence, fear and disruption. There should be zero tolerance for habitually disruptive behavior. One way to do that is to empower teachers to remove disruptive students from the classroom to alternative programs or schools.

**Re-focusing on traditional values:** Respect for the law, hard work, personal responsibility, truthfulness, and respect for individual differences are essential to any successful democratic economic strategy. A couple of ways to instill such values are through greater parental involvement in the schools and student involvement in community service projects.

**Preparing students for jobs of the future:** We must help students understand, use and apply technology. That can be achieved if we follow through on the technology plan anticipated by Florida's Blueprint 2000 legislation and if we integrate it with the School to Work Program.

The future of Florida public schools is too important to be left to political gimmickry. Political and special interests gimmicks are divisive and counterproductive to achieving solutions which meet the needs of each and every child. Important questions need consideration. Would spending public tax dollars for private and religious schools further diminish funding for public schools already hard pressed? Would it leave the public schools with the poor and children with special needs and with less resource to do the job? Would it violate the Constitutional principle of separation between church and state? Would it mean less accountability in education, because private schools (unlike public schools) aren't required to publicly report test results or finances? Would opening the state treasury to private school interests further stratify our society by class, religion and race, thus undermining the goal of a tolerant and pluralistic society? The answer to each of those questions is an **emphatic yes!** The risks inherent in allowing tax dollars to flow in support of private (religious, class or economic) preferences are substantial, and in my judgment not balanced by any proof of educational benefit.

So before we consider dividing up the public treasury between competing private interests and before we abandon our public schools, we better think seriously about what those schools have meant to America. Roy Romer, former Governor of Colorado, said it best. He said, "Our public schools have been a meeting place for all kinds of Americans, a place where initial fear over differences in culture melted away into mutual understanding." He went on to say, "When you encourage separate schools for Methodists, for Lutherans, for Catholics and Jews and Moslems, when you divide youngsters by race and class or by their parents' view of creation, you become less like America and more like Bosnia." ■



Let's look at some of the evidence.

### Admission

Voucher proponents claim that families will be able to choose from an unlimited range of educational options. What they fail to tell you is that parents may choose a private school, but the school is not required to choose their child.

- 24 percent of private elementary schools require an admissions test;
- 36 percent of private elementary and 53 percent of private secondary schools review a student's academic record;
- 45 percent of private elementary and 64 percent of private secondary schools require an interview with the student and the student's parents;
- 39 percent of private secondary schools check a student's recommendations

Catholic high schools are particularly likely to screen students.

- 59 percent require an admissions test;
- 41 percent require a standardized achievement test;
- 77 percent review a student's academic record
- 58 percent check a student's recommendations.

### Student Characteristics

Voucher advocates often claim that private schools do a better job with the same kinds of students, particularly with disadvantaged children from inner cities. However, the evidence shows otherwise. Because private schools hand-pick their students and charge tuition, their students come from more advantaged backgrounds than public school students. Even when private schools serve disadvantaged children from inner cities, they are usually selecting those with the most family support and motivation to succeed.

### Student Achievement

Probably the most misleading argument from voucher advocates deals with student achievement. Voucher advocates claim private school students score higher than their public school counterparts. The fact is, the private school edge is usually small and often disappears when students of similar background are compared in each type of school.

In the city of Milwaukee where a pilot voucher program for low-income students was tried, researchers found that voucher students in the private schools failed to achieve any better in math or reading than low-income students who remained in Milwaukee public schools.

Additionally, in another study, private school 8th- and 12th-graders had no advantage over public school students who had taken similar courses in math and science.

And in yet another survey, Money magazine found that students who attend the best public schools outperform most private school students, and that the best public schools offer a more challenging curriculum than most private schools. Those statistics come as a result of a study of 70 public and private schools by the magazine.

### Market Competition

As I mentioned earlier, voucher advocates claim that vouchers will open our schools to market competition. Competition makes everyone excel, they say. However, free and fair competition requires that all participants play by the same rules. Most voucher proposals place public schools on an uneven playing field. Private schools are mostly exempt from public rules concerning admission, due process, curriculum, teacher qualifications, oversight, special education, student testing, and financial accountability.

In fact, an initiative rejected by California voters in 1993 would have given parents \$2,600 vouchers to use at almost any school that could enroll 25 students. Private schools would have been allowed to discriminate on the basis of sex, religion, disability, and prior academic or behavioral record, and still receive taxpayer funds. Furthermore, a study of choice in Britain, France, and the Netherlands found that private school choice increased social and economic segregation of students.

### Cost

Cost is another commonly held misconception. Voucher proponents argue that private schools are more efficient than public schools and cost less per pupil. The fact is, private schools are no more efficient than public schools in containing costs. Between 1987-88 and 1990-91, average tuition at private schools grew 34 percent. During the same period, public school expenses per child rose by only 27 percent.

Consider too, the hidden cost of vouchers. They could end up costing taxpayers dearly --those with children in private and public school. That's because the parents of the more than 230,000 children already in private school would receive a voucher for each of those children. Simple mathematics will show that if each of those children received a voucher of \$3,000, our public schools would lose more than \$700 million before a single child switches schools. The only beneficiary would be the for-profit schools that would crop up to take advantage of this new source of revenue. Not a single student in public schools would be helped.

And parents with kids in private schools who may feel they will not have to shell out tuition should think twice. They should remember that private schools are free to charge whatever amount of tuition they choose. Private schools would no doubt quickly raise tuition once they see that the parents have additional dollars at their disposal in the form of a voucher. That would mean that private school parents would have to surrender the voucher in addition to the tuition they currently pay.

Education does not win under the voucher scheme. Only profiteers stand to gain if we allow them to view Florida education as another business ripe for corporate takeover. A long time ago I learned that if you really want to know someone's true intentions, follow the flow of dollars around that person's ideas. In the case of vouchers, advocates have charted the flow straight from the public till to their back pockets. It's not too late for parents to catch a glimpse of the flow chart and put a stop to it before the well runs dry.



#### **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

*John Ryor, appointed as FTP-NEA's Executive Director in June of 1984, is the chief administrator of the Association. He is responsible for employing and directing the Association staff and executing the decisions of the Association's governing bodies. Prior to his appointment as FTP-NEA Executive Director, Ryor was the Executive Director of the Illinois Education Association for three and a half years, and served as Associate Assistant to the President of the United States for one and a half years. Ryor has extensive Association experience, having served as President of the 2.1 million member National Education Association from 1975 to 1979, and as President of the Michigan Education Association. Ryor holds a Bachelor of Arts and Masters of Arts degrees from Western Michigan University and was a mathematics and history teacher for 16 years.*

*Pat L. Tornillo, Jr. was elected president of the Florida Education Association/United in October, 1979, and has been subsequently re-elected every two years since. Tornillo also holds a position of executive vice president of the United Teachers of Dade (UTD), one of the largest local public employee unions in the country, representing nearly 20,000 school teachers and paraprofessionals in the nation's fourth largest school district.*

*Tornillo earned his B.A. degree from Seton Hall University in South Orange, N.J. Subsequently, he did graduate work at Montclair State Teachers College in New Jersey and in Florida at the University of Miami and Barry College. As a classroom teacher, Tornillo became active in the Dade County Classroom Teachers Association (CTA), rising swiftly from the ranks to elective office -- first, as the association's first vice president and subsequently as its president. In 1963, with a year remaining in his term as president, the staff position of Executive Director became vacant and Tornillo was appointed to the post. On acceptance, he relinquished the presidency and also resigned from teaching to devote his full time and energies to improving the lives of the teachers of Dade County.*

*From the start of his career, Tornillo has become known as a fighter for equal rights and justice for every individual. He has been an outstanding leader in upgrading the teaching profession in the South and, through his influence throughout the nation, a persuasive advocate of true quality education for all children.*

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