

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

March 25, 2004

Review and Outlook

## The Empire Strikes Back

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Florida will be a pivotal battleground this November, but on the crucial subject of education reform the battle in that state is already joined.

In the past five years Florida has delivered real school choice to more American schoolchildren than anywhere else in the country. Which is no doubt why Jesse Jackson was down in Tallahassee earlier this month calling Governor Jeb Bush's policies "racist." He and his allies understand all too well that when poor African-American and Latino children start getting the same shot at a decent education that the children of our politicians do, the bankrupt public education empire starts looking like the Berlin Wall.

This is the backdrop to this week's wrangling in the Florida senate over a bill ostensibly aimed at bringing "accountability" to the state's vouchers programs but

which is really aimed at regulating them to death. Yes, there have been embarrassments, notably a "scholarship" operator now being criminally investigated for siphoning off \$268,000. As bad as this is, it is small beer compared to the glaring scandal of a public school system in which more than half the state's African-American and Latino teens will never see a high school diploma.

Ironically those fighting vouchers may have a keener appreciation of Florida's significance to the voucher wars than those defending them. With national attention having focused largely on Milwaukee, Cleveland and the District of Columbia, it's easy to forget that Florida now has three key programs. The first are called Opportunity Scholarships, which allow children to opt out of failing public schools. Second are McKay Scholarships, which provide full

school choice to special-ed students.

But perhaps the most innovative is a corporate tax credit that allows businesses to take a dollar-for-dollar deduction for every contribution to a designated scholarship fund. Certainly in terms of sheer numbers this is the most far-reaching, with 13,000 low-income students now benefiting and 20,000 on a waiting list. Because these corporately funded scholarships are capped at \$3,500 per child in a state where the average per pupil expenditure runs around \$7,500, each scholarship represents not only a lifeline for the recipient but significant savings for the taxpayer.

A just-released study from the Indianapolis-based Milton and Rose Friedman Foundation highlights Florida's achievements. When the various state programs across America were measured against Mr. Friedman's original conception for vouchers, Florida's programs took three of the top eight slots. And another study, this one by the Manhattan Institute, finds that even kids without vouchers benefit because the competition is pushing Florida public schools to improve.

In response, the teachers unions, pols and bureaucrats opposing any reform have opted for a dual strategy of sue and regulate. On the

litigation front, they're banking on the 19th-century, anti-Catholic Blaine Amendment language in their state constitution, on which basis they hope the Opportunity Scholarships will be deemed unconstitutional. If successful, the McKay Scholarships would go out the same legal window—but they're not being directly challenged because the empire understands the bad public relations of targeting special-ed kids.

Meanwhile, they regulate. The accountability bill includes some reasonable provisions (especially in the financial reporting and auditing realms). But its real attraction, as this week's debate demonstrated, was as a vehicle to be loaded up with the kind of voucher-strangling amendments pushed by Democrats Ron Klein and Debbie Wasserman Schultz.

The good news is that despite this all-out effort to frog-march poor kids back into miserable public schools, the genie seems to be out of the bottle. Even the liberal newspapers that oppose school choice had to concede that a pro-voucher rally in Tallahassee attracted more marchers (if not more favorable media attention) than the Reverend Jackson's protest that preceded it. And that's precisely what has them so worried. •