

1/19/05

ORIGINAL EDITORIAL

Can state, church meet on pre-K?

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Thursday, December 16, 2004

The Legislature has to decide whether religious schools that intend to stick to a religious curriculum and even discriminate in favor of certain religions should be included in the pre-K program that lawmakers are inventing during this week's special session. Here are some angles from which to view this issue.

One is that, simply because of the number of seats required, Florida can't build a successful pre-K program without involving religious schools. The program, according to the constitutional amendment voters approved in 2002, must be offered to all 4-year-olds but isn't mandatory. One estimate is that 120,000 will attend.

Letting religious schools supply part of that capacity could bring a bonus because some parents who might skip a purely secular program will be motivated to enroll their 4-year-olds in a faith-based program. Parents who don't want the religious instruction can choose a different pre-K program. Ultimately, it doesn't matter whether children learn their colors and letters from workbooks that feature Skippy the Clown or Jesus Christ. The important thing is that they learn their letters and colors.

A second angle — and this is the way I look at the issue — is that it would be irresponsible for the Legislature to include religious pre-K programs, regardless of the possible practical benefits. Florida courts repeatedly have ruled that the state's first voucher program, which lets parents of children at chronically failing public schools use state money for religious-school tuition, violates Florida's Constitution. That document says no state money may be spent "directly or indirectly in aid of any church, sect or religious denomination or in aid of any sectarian institution." Most recently, the 1st District Court of Appeal in Tallahassee asked, in essence, what part of "no money directly or indirectly" did you not understand?

Given that precedent, spending state money on religious pre-K programs also would violate Florida's Constitution. Unless and until the current precedent is overturned, the state must not build a pre-K structure that relies on providers likely to be knocked out from under it.

Granted, Gov. Bush has not let the voucher program's unconstitutionality stop him from proceeding with it. So the Legislature might feel that it's fine to approve an illegal pre-K program. That attitude violates principles of separation of church and state and the checks-and-balances tradition that have been so important to America's enduring greatness. Ignore the separation, undermine the courts, and the door is open to the kind of religious factionalism that breeds violence and/or human rights abuses in Iran, Iraq, India, Pakistan, the West Bank and elsewhere.

There is a responsible way, I think, to let religious schools participate in the pre-K program. The state could mandate that all pre-K programs teach the same, secular curriculum. Since the pre-K program most likely will be only three hours a day — it should be at least four, but that's another issue — religious day-care centers, in many cases, would be able to provide religious instruction during the part of the day the state doesn't pay for. Specifying the curriculum also would help prevent the kind of abuse that has plagued the corporate tax voucher program, which fails to set academic standards.

Of course, some religious schools are dead set against restrictions on how they spend state money. Howard Burke, director of the Florida Association of Christian Colleges and Schools, told a Post reporter that if the state mandates a Christ-free curriculum, "My kind of religious organizations wouldn't even give this program a second thought."

The proper legislative response to that threat should be: Then don't. But the Legislature and Gov. Bush are sympathetic to another way of looking at religion in pre-K programs: as an opportunity to undermine separation of church and state and to establish Christianity as the de-facto state religion. If the choice is between the Bible as interpreted by the individual and the constitution as interpreted by a court, this extreme but influential faction always will choose the Bible.

Nothing in the Bible, however, requires pre-K classes to have religious content. The state constitution, on the other hand, forbids it. Some religious readers would prefer not to follow the constitution's rules. But Christians should be familiar with the notion that it's wrong to ignore the rules simply because you want to.

RESPONSE

December 16, 2004

Letters to the Editor

The Palm Beach Post
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Dear Editor:

The Post's December 16 editorial on the Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) program before the state legislature this week argued against including private and parochial schools in the program but failed to cite the effect of banning such institutions from the program.

First, failure to implement a UPK program would be a direct violation of the will of Florida voters, as expressed by a 2002 statewide vote. Decisions made by the citizens of this state must not be ignored. In every other state in which they have been challenged, Blaine Amendments were struck down. The governor and legislators, therefore, are not irresponsible for pressing on in support of the UPK but are advocates of the responsibility of legislators to act on the will of their constituents.

Second, Florida has a variety of state-funded programs, including Florida Bright Futures scholarships and Medicaid, that fund services at any institution the recipient chooses. If a man in Fort Lauderdale can visit a doctor at a religious-affiliated hospital and a college student in Orlando can attend a private university, why should a family in Pensacola not be allowed to choose a parochial pre-kindergarten program for their daughter?

Myriad educational opportunities are available to any family that can afford them; the only barrier to options is income. It is unfair that some families are denied the right to choose the best school for their children because they do not earn enough. Educational programs that include school choice options level the playing field for all families.

Sincerely,

Monica Lewis

Principal, Phyl's Academy