

6/13/06

Florida Parents Respond to Court's Scholarship Program Shutdown

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Published: The Heartland Institute 06/01/2006

In mid-April, local parents and a school choice advocacy group launched a radio advertising campaign urging Florida state Sens. Tony Hill (D-Jacksonville) and Gary Siplin (D-Orlando) to support a bill to provide constitutional protection for state-funded scholarship programs threatened by a Florida Supreme Court decision. By the end of the month, both senators vowed they would not do so.

"We still haven't funded [public education] correctly, so I won't support vouchers until public education is properly funded," Siplin said. He cited large class sizes, underpaid teachers, and lack of books as challenges currently facing the public school system. Hill did not return calls for comment.

In January, the Florida Supreme Court declared Opportunity Scholarships unconstitutional. Opportunity Scholarships--essentially, vouchers--had been available to children assigned to public schools that earned two "F" grades in any four-year period. The scholarships allowed parents of these children to receive state funds to pay tuition at the private school of the parents' choice. More than 90 percent of the children participating in the program were minorities. The court ruled the scholarships violated the state's obligation to create a "uniform" public school system and ordered the children back to the public schools.

Serving Students

The state supreme court ruling, and a November 2005 ruling by a state appellate court prohibiting the use of funds at faith-based schools, threaten several other state-funded scholarship programs, including the McKay Scholarship Program for Children with Disabilities and the Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship Program for low-income children.

Statewide, there are more than 30,000 K-12 students who could be forced to return to their assigned public school if the remaining voucher programs are struck down.

When asked how a system he said needs help could handle an even larger burden of students, Siplin said he was "not convinced the system isn't working properly.

"People have kids every day," Siplin said. "We're always going to add to the system."

Protecting Programs

The appellate court ruling also threatens other popular education programs. Currently, parents using the new state-funded pre-kindergarten program, which began last August, may use their grants at faith-based institutions. College students may use Bright Futures scholarships and Florida Resident Access Grants at faith-based colleges such as Bethune Cookman College, Edward Waters College, and Florida Memorial College.

To protect the remaining state-funded scholarships, concerned local parents have been encouraging their elected officials to support legislation that would put the issue on the November ballot for voters to decide. If approved by voters, the measure would create a constitutional amendment protecting state-funded scholarships from pre-kindergarten through college. In February, the same parents joined almost 4,000 scholarship supporters for a rally at the capitol in Tallahassee.

Since then, parents in Orlando and Jacksonville have been calling and writing letters to their legislators, and more than 100 contributed to the radio ad campaign asking Hill and Siplin to support the bill. Also supporting the ad campaign was the Florida Committee for Educational Freedom, a nonprofit group that supports school choice for low-income parents.

Changing Lives

Two of the scholarship programs at risk, the McKay Scholarships and the Corporate Tax Credit Scholarships, together serve more than 2,600 children in Hill's district and more than 2,100 children in Siplin's. One parent featured in a radio ad, Betty Saltares, discussed how an Opportunity Scholarship transformed her child's life.

"This program has made such a difference in Alex's life," Saltares said in the radio spot. "He went from failing to earning A's and B's."

Hill's district is home to 52 schools accepting scholarship students, and Siplin's houses 47. One of them, El Bethel Christian Academy in the Orlando neighborhood of Washington Shores, serves 50 children enrolled in the programs--which is why Bishop Ed Thomas and his wife Carolyn, senior pastors, agreed to appear in an ad.

"These programs are helping children right here in Orlando," Bishop Thomas said. "We see the benefits every day, and it is vital to our community that we continue to offer children the opportunity to attend the best school for them."

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