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Original Editorial

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Test or No Tests?

Florida, which hands out more school tuition vouchers than any other state in the nation, is looking this fall to add more. This time, children who score badly on state reading tests would be given money to go to a private school under the presumption they would do better. But the "Reading Compact Scholarship" offers no assurances. In fact, a child could be sent from a public school the state deems academically excellent to a private school whose academic record is a secret.

This educational hypocrisy underlies Florida's rapid expansion of school privatization. Six years and some \$440-million after plunging into vouchers, the state has yet to resolve a structural contradiction. Under the sweeping A

reform laws, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test is the No. 1 measure of success and failure for public schools. Yet most of the voucher schools refuse to use the FCAT.

So no one really knows whether vouchers are working.

"If we're pulling students out of a . . . public school and putting them into a private school, then where is the validation that they're doing better?" asks state Sen. Jim King, R- Jacksonville, a consistent supporter of vouchers. "Just the fact that we moved them doesn't mean they're doing okay. My thing is this: If we spend state dollars, then we have an obligation to make sure the dollars are well spent. To think that we shouldn't do that is simply nonsense."

The reading voucher, which is winding its way through the Legislature, is only one illustration of King's point. The House version says a public school student who scores at Level I on the FCAT reading test for two out of three years should be offered a voucher. (Nearly 350,000 students currently fall into that category.) But the House bill offers only the possibility that a different standardized test might be required and its results viewed by a private research group. Private school lobbyists argue the FCAT is based on a public school curriculum and shouldn't be required in private schools, as though reading is somehow a specialized skill.

The reading voucher would be the state's sixth new voucher program in six years, and it has come a long way from the 52 students who were awarded vouchers in 1999 because

their two Panhandle schools were judged to be failing. By conservative estimates, Florida could send \$350-million to private schools next year alone. The voucher enrollment could reach 113,000 students, roughly the size of the Pinellas school district. Even removing prekindergarten students from the mix, the voucher enrollment would be larger than 46 of the state's 67 districts.

Yet virtually none of the state's normal educational standards apply.

In most voucher schools, the teachers don't need to be certified, the schools don't need to be accredited, the operators don't have to be screened for possible criminal backgrounds, the students don't have to take the FCAT and they don't have to be held back or denied a diploma because of their performance on any standardized test.

The lack of standards is only part of the problem. The oversight provided by the state Department of Education has been a disaster, leading to at least five administrative and criminal investigations. Here is only a sample of what they have found:

Parents who were prompted to sign powers of attorney at a Panhandle school, which, according to criminal investigators, then signed \$146,268 worth of checks for students who no longer attended.

A Tampa Islamic school that was receiving corporate tax vouchers at a time when the FBI claimed it was a base for terrorism.

A Boynton Beach group that took vouchers for disabled students who were being taught in their own homes.

An Ocala businessman in bankruptcy and with a history of racketeering charges who was handed \$268,000 in voucher money that he never gave to children.

Two schools in Seminole and Orange counties that had their charters revoked by school boards because of uncertified teachers and declining test scores, only to reopen as private schools supported by state vouchers.

Students receiving more than one voucher because the state wasn't comparing lists from the separate programs.

DOE just appointed its eighth voucher administrator in four years, and lawmakers have grown so weary of the department's embarrassments they turned over the new pre-K program to the Agency for Workforce Innovation.

For those keeping score, the state could soon be running six different voucher programs with three different types of oversight and six different forms of payment. The Opportunity Scholarship, the oldest and smallest program, is offered to students whose schools are deemed to be failing because of low FCAT scores. McKay Scholarships are available to any disabled student. Corporate Income Tax scholarships are for

economically disadvantaged students. Virtual school vouchers are for students in kindergarten through eighth grade who are willing to learn at home through a computer. Pre-K vouchers will be available this fall to any 4-year-old. The reading voucher is still in bill form.

The McKay is the most lucrative for entrepreneurs, offering as much as \$20,000 per student, depending on the disability. The Corporate Tax voucher offers only \$3,500 per student, a sum that stands in curious contrast to the online voucher, which is run with no buildings and few teachers, at a cost of \$4,800 per student. Four of the vouchers are overseen by DOE, but the money poured into the Corporate Tax vouchers goes directly to private organizations. Pre-K will be handled through the state's workforce network. The Opportunity Scholarship is the only one based on the theory that a public school is performing badly.

"I think the only reason there hasn't been more of a blending, moving toward some symmetry, has to do with the litigation on the first (voucher program)," says Patrick Heffernan, president of Floridians for School Choice. "Once the litigation runs its course, I think we can begin to deal with the piecemeal approach."

The litigation, now before the Florida Supreme Court, questions whether the state can spend tax money to send students to religious schools. But the constitutional issue bears little relation to the political battle over accountability. One reason the state has failed to bring true oversight and organization to this exploding privatization effort is that critics have been branded as enemies. The two voucher plans that do require FCAT testing are by far the smallest, and private school operators who want no testing and few standards are a potent political force.

Florida is also becoming a haven for national voucher groups. This last election, a group called All Children Matter pumped \$1.6- million - all of it from out of state - into the campaigns of legislative candidates who support vouchers.

As the voucher world has expanded, though, the calls for accountability are coming not just from public school competitors. Some of those who operate respected and credentialed private schools don't want to be lumped in with those who chase government dollars. The Florida Catholic Conference has repeatedly voiced concerns, and even hinted that its schools might not participate in the pre-K vouchers this fall if the state doesn't impose real standards.

"In early '99, when the A

Plan was debated, there was a sense that many private schools could provide a better education," Larry Keough, education associate for the Catholic Conference, said last year. "Now we're at a different place. What we have found is that there have been many dubious types of schools created for the express purpose of drawing down state dollars. As a result, not all the children are being well served."

Legislation to bring financial accountability was blocked in the House last year, and Gov. Jeb Bush and the House are resisting a more comprehensive reform proposed by King this year in the Senate. Bush's education board chairman, Phil Handy, has likened the failings in oversight to "hiccups," and the governor himself has been almost flippant about the lack of checks and balances. In announcing his reading voucher plan, Bush told reporters: "I think it's frankly as American as apple pie to give people choices when what's provided them isn't working."

For better or worse, the governor relies on the FCAT to tell him that "what's provided them isn't working" in public schools. But he has no way to tell whether most of the students on vouchers are succeeding. He and education commissioner John Winn often claim success, but they are generally referring to enrollment increases. One voucher advocacy group, the Manhattan Institute, released a report in 2003 that described McKay voucher schools as "superior" based solely on a survey of parents. Without test results, it had no other source of information.

"My biggest problem with vouchers is that there is not a standard accountability measure," says Wayne Blanton, executive director for the Florida School Boards Association. "Quite frankly, there are some very good public schools and some very good private schools. But until we compare apples to apples, we don't know which ones are doing a good job and which aren't."

As Florida ratchets up the number of private schools getting public money, the excuses are sounding more and more strained. After all, in the Bush view of education, standardized testing is the essential tool to verify whether students are learning. The governor has repeatedly denounced those who claim the FCAT is used in onerous and punitive ways, and President Bush has beaten the same drum in the nation's capital. Just last month, when asked about testing requirements under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, President Bush said: "I've heard every excuse in the book not to test. My answer is, how do you know if a child is learning if you don't test?"

The president's question is one his brother has yet to answer. If the FCAT is to be the engine that drives Florida's education system, how does the governor excuse any school that refuses to use it? That's the Florida voucher conundrum.

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Response

Education needs drastic reform

Re: Test or no test? March 27.

The main points of this 1,700-word article appear to be that vouchers are rife with fraud and that they are not "accountable." By your own account losses in choice programs

amount to less than one-tenth of 1 percent. Do you believe the public schools operate as efficiently? Taxpayers recently spent \$60-million just to renovate Jones High School in Orlando during a period when it lost students. The Miami Herald recently detailed losses in the Miami-Dade County public schools in the hundreds of millions.

Florida graduates less than half of its minority children, and yet here in my own Hillsborough County taxpayers will spend \$8,523 per child in the public schools this year, according to its published budget. That's just in operating costs - nothing for construction or interest on debt. This situation is more than dire, it is tragic. It calls for drastic reform and trying new ideas. You may be satisfied with the status quo, but low-income parents are not. They are desperate for choices.

We have 12,000 children in the state on tax credit scholarships. Their parents earn an average of \$23,000 per year, yet they are willing to pay out of their own pockets to supplement the \$3,500 maximum scholarship. By law we can't pay for extra tuition, uniforms or activities fees. The schools they choose are required in both the House and Senate accountability legislation to administer nationally recognized standardized tests such as the Stanford 9. Private schools already face that requirement from parents. They demand testing because they want to know how their children are doing.

You claim that vouchers "avoid the test by which public schools are measured," the FCAT. Yet public schools avoid the much harder test faced by schools taking voucher students: If the child doesn't learn, the parent takes the business elsewhere, just like in the real world. Do you not trust the judgment of these low-income parents to make the right decision for their children? I do, because I have seen them do it.

Let's make a deal to really "level the playing field." Give all low-income parents in Florida the right to choose the best schools for their children, regardless of who runs them. Fund every low-income child the same no matter where they go. Do that, and you will have the moral justification to demand they take whatever test you please.

John Kirtley, Florida PRIDE Scholarship Program, Tampa