

5/11/06

The aim of school vouchers is to improve public education

Letter to the Editor
Published May 11, 2006

The St. Petersburg Times obviously has philosophical differences with those who advocate school vouchers. Fair enough. What's unfair, though, is ascribing dubious motives to those who disagree. Yet that's the prevailing tone of much of the paper's commentary on the topic. Consider, for instance, Tuesday's editorial, *A dubious virtual voucher*. It accuses voucher advocates of viewing "privatization as an end unto itself."

Not so. Gov. Jeb Bush and other voucher supporters have consistently touted parental choice, together with accountability measures such as the FCAT, as a way to improve public education. Moreover, it's beginning to work, as the latest FCAT scores suggest - and as research by Harvard professor Paul Peterson and others has confirmed.

Voucher critics' constant complaints about private schools' "lack of accountability" also ring hollow. The schools attended by voucher recipients have the highest and best form of accountability: parental involvement, a byproduct of parental choice.

How sad that the Florida Senate's schism denied Floridians a chance to vote on a voucher amendment to the state Constitution. It's true, as the Times repeatedly has noted, that "the people have spoken" on the class size amendment, but they've never had a chance to speak on vouchers except in response to loaded questions in public opinion polls.

Indeed, the closest Florida voters came to a real referendum on vouchers was the 2002 race for governor between provoucher Jeb Bush and antivoucher Bill McBride, the teacher unions' candidate. Final score: Bush 56 percent, McBride 43 percent.

Robert F. Sanchez, policy director, James Madison Institute, Tallahassee

Parental oversight can be problematic

Re: A dubious virtual voucher, editorial.

I am not a fan of vouchers to fund private education. If school choice has taught us nothing else, it is that it's hard for even the most informed parents to make school decisions. What about those who are less informed?

Perhaps I am cynical, but when I hear of a child who has gone from being a "D" student to an "A" student upon entering a private school, I wonder if it is the child who has improved, or the grade.

Since lawmakers are determined to keep pushing school vouchers, then I suggest they make it the law that all students in Florida, whether they are private, public or home-schooled, must take the FCAT. The results should have to be published as they are for public schools. If the FCAT is our benchmark, this would ensure that all students are meeting the required standard.

Rosemary Vieira, Palm Harbor

5/18/06

Senate Caved To Union Pressure

Skip directly to the [full story](#).

Published: May 12, 2006

Regarding the front-page article "GOP Votes Suggest Centrist Future" (May 11):

The overall message that I got from this article is that the vote against vouchers in the Florida Senate suggests a more moderate position for the GOP.

I say, "Wrong." This was a Senate vote, not a vote from the citizens of Florida.

In my opinion, it's simply a case of those who voted against the amendment caving in to the power of the teachers union. Had the amendment gone to a vote, it would have enlightened the public about the problems in our public schools.

The bigger issue is that the Senate voted against needed reform in education. Now we will continue onward, not forward, and build more schools, lose more qualified teachers because of unmanageable class sizes, funnel tax dollars to management as opposed to the classroom, and raise taxes.

BILL BEERS

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

GOP Votes Suggest Centrist Future

Skip directly to the [full story](#).

By WILLIAM MARCH wmarch@tampatrib.com

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TAMPA - When the Florida Senate rejected two constitutional amendments on education in the closing days of the recent legislative session, it didn't just hand Gov. Jeb Bush a stunning setback.

It also raised questions about the future direction of the Florida Republican Party.

In the two votes, maverick Republicans joined Democrats to chip away at pieces of Bush's education reforms, the signal achievement of his political career.

That struck at the foundation of the conservative political philosophy Bush has espoused as governor and party leader for more than a decade and raised the question of whether the party soon may move in a more moderate direction.

"The message of those two votes is we [the Republican Party] are getting a little too far from the bulk of the population," said state Rep. Ed Homan, of Tampa.

The mavericks were emboldened by the winding down of the Bush era - Bush's term as governor ends this year - and his brother's political difficulties in Washington.

The GOP candidates for governor this year, Charlie Crist and Tom Gallagher, are competing to fill the void.

The Republicans who voted against the amendments in the Senate, and most of those who opposed a similar measure in the House, support Crist, widely perceived as more moderate than Gallagher.

Gallagher backers say he is more likely than Crist to keep the party headed in the hard-line conservative direction of the Bush brothers.

"It appears at first glance that the more moderate faction of the party is gravitating toward Charlie Crist," said former party Chairman Al Cardenas, a Gallagher backer and longtime ally of Jeb Bush.

He said, however, that the appearance of a moderate-conservative battle could change as the two elaborate on their positions.

Some Crist backers say their candidate is more centrist than Gallagher, and therefore more electable.

"Charlie's got the crossover appeal" for Democrats and independents, said Shane Strum, chairman of the Broward County Republican Party executive committee, which has taken the unusual step of endorsing Crist in the primary.

Crist denies being a "moderate," a term that in today's state party is virtual anathema. Both he and Gallagher said they would have voted for both of the constitutional amendments that were defeated in the Senate.

In his campaign, Crist hasn't courted the religious right as assiduously as Gallagher, nor has he attacked some liberal-conservative litmus issues, including tort reform, with the stridency of Gallagher.

Crist also has distanced himself from the governor on at least one touchstone issue for social conservatives, Bush's controversial handling of the Terri Schiavo case. Crist has said he wouldn't have intervened to prolong the life of the woman, who was in a permanent vegetative state.

Signature Issue: Education

Bush became leader of the state GOP in 1994, when he won the primary for governor, though he narrowly lost the governorship that year to Lawton Chiles. He didn't become governor until 1998.

On social issues, Bush has taken the party toward the religious right and social conservatives; on environmental, tax and regulatory issues, business and economic growth have been the top priority.

Meanwhile, religious or social conservatives have replaced moderates as party leaders in one county after another, including Pinellas, Hillsborough and Pasco.

Education has been Bush's signature issue.

His long-standing goals have been to undercut the power of what he calls the public education bureaucracy, meaning teachers unions and education administration; to institute more testing in public schools, though not private schools; to oppose the idea that more money will solve the problems of the public schools; and to divert tax money to private schools.

"Our public school system is foundering, and the problem isn't money," he said in an education position paper during his 1994 campaign.

The antidote, he said, was "portable scholarships," or vouchers, to create competition for what he called "a government monopoly."

The two amendments rejected in the Legislature were intended to uphold the progress Bush has made on that agenda since becoming governor:

- In January, the state Supreme Court declared unconstitutional his centerpiece voucher program, tuition subsidies for students in schools considered by the state to be failing. One of the amendments would have removed the constitutional blockage to the program.
- The other would have watered down a previous amendment, passed by voters in 2002 over Bush's vehement opposition, that required smaller classes in public schools.
- In the state House, meanwhile, a small group of Republicans also voted with Democrats against a similar measure, including the class-size amendment and another backed by conservatives.

The Honeymoon Ends

Those votes contrasted sharply with 1998, when Bush was a new governor with a big mandate, and his education changes sailed through the Legislature despite a significant number of moderates who weren't comfortable with them.

That year, "we were all drinking the Kool-Aid," said Sen. Dennis Jones, of Seminole, who helped pass the vouchers program as speaker pro tem in the House in 1998, though he has never favored vouchers.

He was one of the four GOP senators to vote against vouchers last week.

Jack Latvala, a former GOP state senator from Palm Harbor, also opposed vouchers but helped pass them in 1998 as Senate majority leader.

He said Jones and the other Republicans who voted last week against the amendments "should be commended. I don't know why the Republican Party thinks they're smarter than the voters."

Homan, a Democrat who switched parties to run for office, said he fears the Republican Party could get too far from the mainstream - a trap he said Democrats fell into.

He was one of a handful of House Republicans who, like the Senate mavericks, voted with Democrats on the amendments.

Homan supports Gallagher because, as a physician, he prefers Gallagher's harder-line stance on limiting malpractice lawsuits, but he thinks Gallagher will become more of a moderate in the general election, when he no longer has to appeal to GOP activists to get the nomination.

"For a party to be successful, you can't deviate too far from that big bubble in the center," Homan said. "If the Republicans keep moving to the right, they're going to lose that fight."