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**A Michigan-based group created to promote vouchers has joined the election discourse in Florida, but hasn't made its agenda clear to voters.**

A St. Pete Times Editorial  
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A national school voucher group has pumped a half-million dollars into Florida legislative campaigns this fall, but voters can be forgiven for missing the point. The radio, television and mail messages make scant or no mention of vouchers. Rather, All Children Matter, which is based in Grand Rapids, Mich., draws stark portraits of candidates as either loving or hating schoolchildren.

Of Frank Farkas, a three-term Republican House member from St. Petersburg, two printed mailers portray him as "a trusted voice for Florida schools" and say he wants to "fully fund our schools" and "reward good teachers with good pay" and "provide up-to-date textbooks and technology."

Of Israel Mercado, a teacher who is challenging Republican incumbent John Quinones from Kissimmee, a radio commercial denounces him for a "pretty thin record" and "especially on education." It goes further to say Mercado "didn't vote for smaller class sizes."

Note that none of these messages mentions vouchers, the purpose for which All Children Matter was primarily created. But the questionnaire the group sent to legislative candidates certainly does. Ten of the 11 issues deal with vouchers or choice schools. A few examples: "Do you believe the Legislature should empower parents to choose the school of their choice, even if it is a private or religious school?" "Should parents of K-12 'scholarship' recipients . . . attending non-public schools decide if their school is academically adequate or should the state make that determination?" Should the voucher amount be increased for the corporate tax voucher? Should voucher schools be required to be accredited, even though "a majority of Florida's public schools are not accredited"?

Brecht Heuchan, a Tallahassee lobbyist and All Children consultant, says his group has nothing to hide: "We have a Web site. We have a stated mission. It's clear to those who want to look at it."

But voters who are being treated to these messages are not led to a Web site or given a clear picture of the group's real goals: 1) Three out-of-state checks, totaling \$510,000,

have been deposited into a campaign account whose local chairman is John Kirtley, the Tampa businessman credited with persuading the Legislature to pass what is now the state's largest voucher program. 2) The money is being used in this general election to support Republican House members. 3) House Republicans earlier this year blocked a bill, supported by the Senate and the Department of Education, that would have brought some minimum accountability standards to the state's three voucher programs.

All Children is certainly welcome to enter the campaign debate in Florida, even if it is using the unregulated sums that fuel these so-called 527 groups. Its voice is also welcome in the discourse over the role of private and public education and the standards that accompany each. But if it is hoping to gain credibility, its camouflaged campaign will not help.

Voters deserve to know the score, and to All Children Matter, vouchers are what matter most.

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To their credit, the Times published John Kirtley's response without editing. Another LTE published in response is below it. As John Kirtley has noted on several occasions, it is interesting in Florida how just labeling school choice a "voucher" is enough to win the argument in some minds.

## **Group seeks educational choices for low-income parents**

Letters to the Editor

Published October 28, 2004

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Re: All Children Matter.

We are a 527 organization created to help low-income families have more educational options for their children. We are in favor of all kinds of school choice, not just one. I have told the Times editorial board personally that accountability, both financial and academic, is our highest priority. In fact, the Times reporter who interviewed me this week for your story on ACM asked what our highest priority is for the 2005 legislative session. My reply: passing an accountability bill.

In your Oct. 27 editorial, you state that House Republicans blocked an accountability bill last year. Republicans and Democrats worked hard last year to pass an accountability bill in the House with strong bipartisan support. Speaking of Democrats, ACM was very

active in Democratic primaries this year, as I also informed your reporter. Our goal is bipartisan support of school choice.

Your chief complaint about us seems to be that we don't restrict our ads to one topic, or even one word. I don't recall the Times complaining in 2002 when the Florida teachers union spent \$3-million of teachers' money on television ads that enabled Bill McBride to win the Democratic gubernatorial primary. Many of the ads were gauzy biographies of the candidate that made no mention of education.

Our mission is to improve all of K-12 education in Florida. I suspect what really upsets you is that someone is finally working to help low-income parents have the power to choose the best school for their children. Unions and other powerful interests have long funded politicians who resist giving them that power. It's still not a fair fight, but help is on the way.

-- John Kirtley, chairman, All Children Matter-Florida, Tampa

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## **The word they don't want to say**

Letters to the Editor

Published October 28, 2004

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Re: Pro-voucher group showers cash on campaigns, Oct. 26.

Has polling, talking points and political punditry taken over on every level of government? In this article, we are treated to the excellent quote, "Just because we don't use the word people who are opposed to school choice use, that shouldn't be held against us."

What? Oh, I get it. School choice means vouchers, and vouchers are not uniformly liked. And in defending his use of not using the word voucher, this person cannot even bring himself to use that awful word.

In the same article, Rep. Frank Farkas says he's not for vouchers. Of course, the article is about a pro-voucher group supporting him, and cites two bills he sponsored that are for vouchers.

So we get a voucher group that refuses to say the word voucher, and a representative who passes voucher legislation, but says he is not for vouchers.

I don't know about you, but I've had it.

-- Donna Whitts, St. Petersburg