

Republican-Led Measures Attack Public Education in Florida

Summary

The last seven years have witnessed a Republican-led onslaught against public education in Florida. Not only has funding for the very successful Bright Futures college scholarship program been cut in half, new measures are being proposed to further gut public school funding. GOP-driven legislation just empowered charter schools across the state to take a disproportionate per capita share of the state education budget, forcing schools to equally divide the state's education funding even though public school children outnumber the charter school population by an unbelievable 10-to-1 margin.

Cutting High-Achieving High Schoolers from Financial Help for College

In 1997, the Florida Legislature instituted the Bright Futures Program to give merit-based scholarships to students graduating from Florida high schools. The award was funded by the state lottery and aid was granted based on a student's GPA, SAT or ACT scores and hours of community service. In 2008, the tuition of fully 39% of students in Florida colleges was paid by this very successful program.

In 2011, the Republican-led legislature wanted to raise the tuition at state colleges, but did not want to increase the cost of the Bright Futures Program. To keep costs down, the Florida College Access Network reports, they toughened the entry requirements by increasing the required ACT or SAT score. The cuts primarily affected lower income students from poorer schools. By 2015, participation in the program (enrollment in a degree or certificate program at an eligible Florida public or independent postsecondary institution) had been cut in half, decreasing to 20%.

Charter School Support: Taking from the Many, Giving to the Few

In May 2017, the Republican legislature passed H.B. 7069 without public discussion. Gov. Scott signed the bill in June 2017. In its essence, the bill carves out state education money from the funds supporting public education and authorizes \$140 million to develop "Schools of Hope". These specialized charter schools, subsidized by the authorized money, would be set up in mostly low-income areas. The charter schools are encouraged to compete with struggling neighborhood schools. The new schools are considered part of the public school system; however the law sharply limits school boards' ability to establish any requirements for the new charters.

There are 270,000 children enrolled in Florida charter schools and 2.5 million children in the Florida public-school system. Despite a nearly 10-1 ratio of public school to charter school populations, the two groups will be forced to share equally in Public Education Capital outlay funds (PECO). Using this equation, the charter schools could receive a disproportionate \$185.19 per student, while the traditional public schools would receive just \$20.00/student. In addition, the school districts now must share up to \$96 million in locally-raised tax revenues with charter schools. The money was originally slated for construction and maintenance of public-schools.

Changing the Constitution to Strip Power from Local School Boards

Article IX of the Florida Constitution includes provisions that define the manner in which the state is to handle public education. It has been amended only twice in the last 20 years, in 1998 and 2002. Now a Republican-led Constitutional Revision Commission has Article IX in its sights and is suggesting changes that would open the playing field to more charter schools, potentially decreasing the resources available to teach the students in existing public schools.

There are 37 members on the Commission. Thirty-one are Republicans, three are Democrats and three are of unknown affiliation. The following are proposals the Commission is considering putting before voters on the November 2018 ballot:

- *Proposal 71.* The Florida Legislature would be able to authorize new charter schools. Currently the ability to authorize new charter schools is limited to Florida school boards, presumably far more qualified to make that call than state legislators.
- *Proposal 93.* Authorizes high performing school districts to become charter districts. Democrats opposed the measure since it would weaken the struggling schools even further by pulling students away from them; and the money and effort would be better spent improving those schools.
- *Proposal 45.* Specifies that no provision of the State Constitution may be construed to limit the Legislature from making provision for other educational services that are beneficial to the children and families of the State. Again, placing education decisions in the hands of legislators rather than qualified school boards.
- *Proposal 4.* Removal of the prohibition in Article I section 3 on funding for church, sect, religious denomination, or sectarian institution, thereby eliminating barriers to using state money to fund private and religious schools.

Sources:

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Florida Constitution Revision Commission: <http://flcrc.gov/Proposals>

The League of Women Voters of Florida: “CRC Education Amendments ATTACK K12 Public Schools”: <http://lwveducation.com/crc-education-amendments-attack-k12-public-schools/>