

The Delray Democrat

Mothers, Don't Let Your Children Grow Up to be Teachers (or Lies My State Told Me)¹

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Do you remember when the state of Florida was pitching The Lottery to us? The profits would go to “enhance” education, not take the place of monies budgeted for education. Then, the state quietly started putting Lotto profits into the education budget, taking the place of tax-generated dollars. Also, at the outset, the state promised it would never advertise because that might exacerbate issues for those individuals with a gambling problem. After a few years, though, there suddenly appeared enormous billboards along the highway and commercials on TV enticing Floridians to take a chance (“grab it!”) on Lotto. So, Tallahassee lying to the public has become part of the fabric of life in this state.

We in education used to be thankful for the existence of the great state of Mississippi. Why? Because Mississippi allocated the smallest per student dollar investment in the nation. We here in Florida, then, couldn't be called out as the nation's stingiest state for funding our children's education. Budget conscious politicians in Tallahassee have traditionally seen education costs as, well, an annoyance. That said, you won't be surprised to learn that teacher salaries in our public schools are among the lowest in the nation. Yet, during my 28 years of teaching here, I witnessed the state enjoying a very substantial return on its paltry investment: despite disappointing salaries, I've seen teachers put in immeasurable amounts of time, after school hours, helping students in academic need. Gratis. Also, as has been well-documented, teachers consistently dig into their own wallets for classroom needs and to help indigent students.

So, teachers, I think we can all agree, are not in it to become rich. There must be a selfless “giving” gene that DNA researchers have yet to identify. (Autopsies of former teachers should reveal it. And if the Florida Retirement System has its way, there will soon be more and more elderly teachers available for autopsies.)

The Florida Retirement System offers public school teachers (surprise!) one of the smallest retirement pensions of any state. (Again, thanks Mississippi for making us look, if not good, at least not the worst.) During the last decade, in fact, the state has taken 3% annually of teachers' salaries to help fund pensions. And it ought to be noted that our retirement system is fairly well-funded to continue paying retirees. But that doesn't sit well with Florida's Republican legislators.

Do you remember when Republicans in Congress tried to derail Social Security and replace it with an optional 401K investment scheme? Lobbyists for wealthy Republican donors LOVED this plan. Yes, it would defund Social Security, but what a windfall for Wall Street! Since Republicans have never cared about the well-being of the lower and middle classes, there must have been much sadness among the upper one-percenters when the legislation couldn't get through the Congress,

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thereby saving Social Security.

Similar to the oft-repeated lie about trickle down economics benefiting everyone, Republicans keep hammering away at any government plan that would actually help those who aren't wealthy donors. Now, in Tallahassee, with the SB 1014 and HB 835 pieces of legislation, it appears that Florida will strip teachers of their promised pensions. You see, these bills will shift money from the Florida Retirement System's pension plan into, instead, 401Ks. So, those receiving pensions after 30 years of service, and those about to retire, will be left destitute. Promised (paid into!) pensions? A thing of the past. So, hello financial ruin for teachers in their golden years. Good-bye financial security.

Mothers, dissuade your children from becoming teachers. At least in Florida.

(Mr. Lifson is a retired educator, having been a teacher at Santaluces Community High School and an Adjunct Professor at Broward College.)