

# The Delray Democrat

## Are We Headed Toward Privatizing Education in Florida?\*

*June S. Neal*

You have to give it to him. Gov. Ron DeSantis' scheme to weaken our public schools in favor of increased private, religious and home schooling has worked. As expected, when he eliminated income restrictions on school vouchers, there was a surge in applicants this summer. Heck, even wealthy folks can have the state pick up the tab for all or part of their children's private schooling.

Florida may be on the trajectory toward total privatization of our public schools.

What was originally a strategy to help poor children exit failing schools is now a dark design to destroy public education, supplant it with private schools, and bill the taxpayers.

June S. Neal of Delray Beach is a former columnist for the *As* of Aug. 18, 2023, school vouchers, officially the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program, siphoned off 407,000 students from our public schools while the rest of the 430,000 applications were being reviewed and more were coming in. DeSantis called this "... a monumental increase over last year's enrollment of nearly 250,000 students."

It's also a monumental decrease in funding for public education.

If it appears to be an incongruent strategy by a governor who frequently praises Florida's public education, it is. But it's also political insurance against fallout from both sides. DeSantis aims for positive media coverage of his public-school governance, while he simultaneously props up substandard institutions that use the same Christian nationalist playbook he thinks will advance him to the presidency.

Vouchers have a shameful past. In the 1950s and '60s, Southern states used them to skirt the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision that declared school segregation unlawful. The result was white flight to private schools, paid for with vouchers that drained taxes from the wretched public schools the Black children were left in. Vouchers were nothing more than Jim Crow in a new shirt.

DeSantis is using them for a different kind of segregation — severing his straight, white Christian philosophy from our modern democratic ethos.

Floridians are facing an existential threat to their schools and their democracy. The Education Law Center warns: "Already underfunded public school districts will be financially gutted. The

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<sup>1</sup> [The Delray Democrat](#), September 2023, page 6.

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potential for harm to local public-school districts, which serve most Florida students, is extreme.”

And so is the harm to our kids.

A years-long investigation by the Orlando Sentinel and reviews by major independent organizations found too many voucher schools offer a substandard education.

Reporters uncovered mostly Christian-based curricula, much of which was anti-science, anti-LGBTQ, racially biased and almost completely unregulated.

DeSantis has already deformed Florida’s public education with his racist, homophobic legislation. And private, religious schools (we don’t have enough information on home schools) are fertile spots to indoctrinate even more students with his straight, white and Christian ethos. “For the 2023 school year, there are 1,448 religiously affiliated private schools serving 298,720 students in Florida,” according to Private School Review.

The Sentinel reported, “Some private schools in Florida that rely on public funding teach students that dinosaurs and humans lived together, that God’s intervention prevented Catholics from dominating North America and that slaves who ‘knew Christ’ were better off than free men who did not.”

The reporters found, “The books are rife with religious and political opinions on ... abortion, gay rights. They disparage religions other than Protestant Christianity and cultures other than those descended from white Europeans.” And yet, as of February 2023, only 27.2% of students using the voucher program are white. Further, 81.4% of the schools accepting vouchers are officially religious.

And the vouchers are supporting actively anti-LGBT schools. In 2020, “14% of Florida’s nearly 147,000 scholarship students attended private schools where homosexuality was condemned or, at a minimum, unwelcome,” reporters discovered. Several private schools that received millions of dollars in vouchers promoted conversion therapy for LGBTQ students.

So, besides bigotry, what else are taxpayers getting for their money?

Lack of accountability in unregulated schools, for one. “Private elementary and secondary schools in Florida are not licensed, approved, accredited or regulated” by the state, according to the Florida Department of Education.”

The arbitrary appropriation of money is also crippling our schools. In 2021, the Southern Poverty Law Center found: “No state comes close to Florida in the allocation of public funds to private schools ... decreasing per pupil funding by 12% from \$9,799 to \$8,628 while the rest of the country’s schools increased their spending by 9.6%.” Florida ranks “seventh from the bottom of all states in per pupil funding at \$9,346.”

Public education is fundamental to democracy. It’s the nation’s singular institution structured to cohere a hugely heterogenous population into Americans. Whatever deficits our schools have should be fixed with the tax dollars we are now diverting to private schools that are operating on principles most Americans have worked for decades to eradicate.