

PalmBeachPost

School voucher bill is like a zombie that won't die

By Frank Cerabino

March 29, 2014

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — I'm not surprised that state legislators are refusing to let a school voucher bill die a well-deserved death this year.

The bill, which would radically expand the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program, seemed to be kaput when it hit a roadblock in the state Senate.

But don't count on it. The dismantling of public education in Florida has been underway for years, and bills that divert public dollars to private hands might suffer temporary setbacks and minor rewrites, but they have death-defying zombie-like powers.

It might have something to do with the money thrown at state lawmakers.

Yes, this is a loaded charge. But I'm just paraphrasing the words of Doug Tuthill, the president of Step Up for Students, the group at the center of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program.

Step Up for Students, organized as a charity, receives millions of dollars every year in administration fees for converting would-be tax dollars into school tuition money for poor students to attend mostly religious-based private schools.

Tuthill was a featured speaker three years ago at a California symposium that examined the role of faith-based schools in the school-choice movement. He told the attendees why the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program has been such a juggernaut, growing at 25 percent a year and aiming at a 10-year-plan that would use public money to pay the private-school tuitions of about a quarter-million Florida students.

"One of the primary reasons we've been successful is we spend about \$1 million every other cycle in local political races, which in Florida is a lot of money," Tuthill said. "In House races and Senate races, we're probably the biggest spender in local races.

"Because the Republican Party is fairly solid on our issue, most of the money we're spending is in Democratic primaries," he said. "I'd like to say that people do it because it's the right thing to do, but that \$1 million every other cycle gets people's attention."

Tuthill boasted that using the charity's lobbying arm, The Florida Federation for Children, to flood Democratic primaries in Florida with cash, the school voucher program now has solid bipartisan appeal.

“When we first started we only had one Democrat in the entire Legislature that supported the program,” he said. “Now we have about half of the Democrats.”

To be eligible to receive a voucher under this program, the children have to come from families that live at or near the poverty line.

This year’s expansion of the program would raise eligibility to those families that are 260 percent above the poverty line. It would tap into other tax sources, and increase the annual tax dollars available to \$873 million in four years, a far cry from the \$47 million cap on the program when it started 12 years ago.

Tuthill made it clear that his long-term goal was to make every student, regardless of economic situation, eligible to get a public-supported, private-school education in Florida. Starting with the poor kids is just a political maneuver.

“In a world of finite resources, we focus our resources as a tactical priority on the high-poverty family. That’s another reason why we’ve been very, very successful, is because we make low-income families the face of the program.

“It’s all about parental empowerment, and here’s the face,” he said. “An overwhelming majority of the folks in our program are Democrats ... We put those people in the face of Democrats and say, ‘How can you deny this parent the right to educate their child in the way that they need?’

“That and the money has gone a long way to creating this cognitive dissonance among Democrats.”

And by the time the program seeps into the middle class, it will be too late to stop.

Florida’s expansion of public funding of private schools will have a significant “domino effect,” said Andrew Coulson, the director of the Cato Institute’s Center of Educational Freedom.

“If you have 300,000 kids in a single state in private schools, thanks to a school-choice program, you’re eventually going to have everybody in that state in a school-choice program, because the parents who aren’t eligible for it will demand the ability to participate,” Coulson said at the symposium.

And then you’ll have your tax dollars going to a largely unregulated gaggle of private schools that lack the teacher certification and student testing requirements of public schools. A playground for shortcuts and profiteering.

Behold the zombie.

It’s going to take a lot more than a temporary setback to kill this beast.