



Posted on Mon, Jan. 03, 2011

## Scott's voucher proposal courts a few problems

BY FRED GRIMM

[fgrimm@MiamiHerald.com](mailto:fgrimm@MiamiHerald.com)

Rick Scott's universal school voucher plan hardly lacks for an appealing philosophical rationale: Allow parents to shop for a school -- public or private, brick or virtual -- in a competitive education marketplace.

Theoretically, lousy schools, exposed by tawdry achievement scores, would wither away without their captive students.

Maybe. If knucklehead parents with kids in faltering schools can tear themselves away from *Paris Hilton's My New BFF* and search out better institutions.

But even folks who love the notion of vouchers might worry about a daunting new \$1.84 billion financial obligation folded into the governor's proposal.

### AVAILABLE TO ALL

A draft proposal put together by Scott's education team suggests handing out vouchers worth 85 percent of the state's per-pupil expenditure to *any* parents who enroll their child in private schools, online education or private tutoring. Based on last year's allocation, that would come to about \$5,500 a head.

About 11 percent of the state's K-through-12 students already attend private schools. The Florida Department of Education counted 335,211 during the 2007-08 school year. None of whom will be using their \$5,500 vouchers -- subtracting another \$1.84 billion from the state school budget -- to escape a failing public school.

### MONEY IS SHORT

Scott also intends to cut property taxes by 19 percent, meaning more reductions in school revenues. State economists, meanwhile, predict a \$3.5 billion shortfall in state tax collections.

Public-school advocates complain that the voucher plan demands accountability only from the public sector. Private schools, home schoolers, online educators aren't held to test score standards or other measures of educational progress.

``It's one thing to give parents a choice," said Georgia Slack, longtime state lobbyists for the Broward School Board, which opposes the voucher plan. ``It's another to send all this tax money to institutions with no accountability."

Which leads to another hurdle facing Scott. In 2006, the Florida Supreme Court rejected Gov. Jeb Bush's far less radical Opportunity Scholarships, which limited vouchers to kids in failing schools. The court ruled that the Bush plan established ``separate private systems parallel to and in competition with the free public schools that are the sole means set out in the Constitution for the state to provide for the education of Florida's children."

### **`DIRECT VIOLATION'**

The court said the Opportunity Scholarship voucher plan ``not only reduces money available to the free schools, but also funds private schools that are not uniform when compared with each other or the public system. Many standards imposed by law on the public schools are inapplicable to the private schools receiving public monies."

The ruling said the plan fostered, ``plural, non-uniform systems of education in direct violation of the constitutional mandate for a uniform system of free public schools."

The St. Petersburg Times reports that Andrew Coulson, director of the conservative Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, an advocate of vouchers, sent out an e-mail last month warning that given the 2006 ruling, ``there does not seem to be any way the Court could uphold any sort of voucher program in Florida even if it wanted to -- and there's no reason to think it wants to."

The new governor's team has, indeed, come up with a radical new approach to education. Except for a few niggling, insurmountable problems.