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### Gov.-elect Rick Scott eyes 'game-changing' education overhaul

**Florida's governor-elect wants to put the power of education in parents' hands. But some of his ideas may not be legal, or politically popular.**

By Leslie Postal and Dave Weber, Orlando Sentinel

9:49 PM EST, January 2, 2011

Gov.-elect Rick Scott wants Florida parents in the driver's seat when it comes to their children's education, and he's considering a number of ways to put them there despite questions and criticism from school leaders.

Scott's plans might include allowing parents to choose which schools their kids attend, regardless of attendance zones or county lines.

Parents might be able to use state tax money to send their kids to private school or to cover home-schooling expenses — or, perhaps, to tuck the money away for college.

Parents also could be given direct power to make major changes at poorly performing schools. A "trigger" option would allow parents to design a fix when a majority agree that change is needed. That might include replacing the school's administration, converting to a charter school and other options.

These ideas are among a long menu of potential reforms that Scott's education transition team calls "game-changing proposals." Others include merit pay for teachers, more online learning and a new state funding plan based on what students learn rather than how much time they spend in school.

Scott is mulling all of them, but it's still not clear how many new education reforms lawmakers will embrace.

The boldest idea creates "education savings accounts" that parents would tap for private schools, home schooling or even college if they want to opt out of public schools.

School choice for all has been discussed among educators for quite some time, but Scott's proposal would be the first pushed by a governor, said Paul Peterson, director of the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard University.

"That's really planting a national flag out there," said Peterson, who supports many of Scott's ideas.

Local educators, who would have to carry out any changes, are much less enthusiastic.



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"It's a great idea if you want to do away with public schools," said Judy Conte, a member of the Volusia County School Board.

They say many of Scott's ideas are unworkable, counterproductive and poorly thought out.

Dede Schaffner, chairman of the Seminole School Board, wonders how that highly regarded school system would handle a crush of students from neighboring Orange, Lake and Volusia counties if students were permitted to freely cross county lines to attend whatever school they chose.

"Are we going to get state funding for all of the students that come to us?" asked Schaffner, pointing out that county taxpayers cover a large share of school costs. "And are we going to have the facilities?"

Candace Lankford, a Volusia School Board member who heads the Florida School Boards Association, is concerned that Scott might send dwindling state tax dollars to private schools or home schools but require no accountability. It's a paradox, she said, to demand proof that public schools are succeeding while paying for students to attend private or home schools where no one knows what they are learning.

It remains to be seen whether Scott, who takes office Tuesday, can turn his far-reaching agenda into law. Florida's divisive battle last spring over a teacher-merit-pay bill proved the difficulty of transforming controversial proposals into state law.

The Legislature last session approved a sweeping merit-pay bill, but Gov. Charlie Crist vetoed it.

Even Florida lawmakers supportive of education reform are leery of school choice and other Scott initiatives with high price tags when the state faces a budget shortfall expected to run as high as \$3.5 billion next year.

Legislators and educators also are concerned by Scott's vow to reduce school property taxes. Although he has said he will find replacement funding for the schools, many suspect it will be lost.

"If we have any more money taken away from us, we cannot continue to have the kind of school system we offer," said Darvin Boothe, lobbyist for Seminole County Public Schools.

Scott campaigned to expand reforms championed by former Gov. Jeb Bush and has relied heavily on his ideas. Bush ushered in A-to-F school grades, state-financed tuition vouchers and increased reliance on standardized tests — controversial moves he credits with academic gains among Florida schoolchildren.

Bush's influence continues with the head of his education-advocacy foundation, Patricia Levesque, leading Scott's education-transition team. The group devised a 10-point education plan centered on "reform and innovation" that even suggested the Florida Department of Education be renamed the Florida Department of Education Innovation.

Republican Scott is expected to push the GOP-controlled Legislature to pass much of his education agenda during the upcoming legislative session, which starts in March.

Other key ideas suggested by Scott's team include:

Expanding high-performing charter schools, giving universities the power to sponsor charters and beefing up charter-school funding.

Expanding Florida's two existing voucher programs — the McKay Scholarship program for children with disabilities and the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship for those from low-income families.

Passing a merit-pay law that changes how teachers are evaluated and paid, with their students' academic performance a key factor in both.

Ending tenure for newly hired teachers and speeding removal of ineffective teachers.

Offering higher pay to those who teach in a "high-need" school or subject area.

But the idea of giving parents access to 85 percent of the money the state would spend on their child in a public school is causing the most debate. Already, many have decried Scott's savings plan as an unconstitutional and fiscally irresponsible effort to dismantle public schools.

The Florida Education Association, the state's teachers union, fears the education savings accounts would bring an exodus of students to private or home schools and leave only a "shadow public-school system" remaining.

The union waged a successful court battle to overturn Florida's first school-voucher program, which offered private-school scholarships to students in persistently failing public schools.

"We've been down this road before. It's just a fight that the courts have already ruled on," said Andy Ford, FEA president.

Even some voucher proponents agree. Andrew Coulson, director of the Cato Institute Center for Educational Freedom, favors vouchers but does not believe the education-savings plan will pass review by the Florida Supreme Court, which in 2006 struck down Jeb Bush's Opportunity Scholarship program.

Coulson said a push to expand vouchers to all could jeopardize the state's two remaining voucher programs, which have not been challenged in court.

State Sen. David Simmons, R- Maitland, chairman of the Senate budget subcommittee on education, said he is a "firm believer in school choice" but remains cautious about the savings plan.

"The assurance that children are going to receive a quality education from such a proposal is obviously one of the main questions that has to be answered," Simmons said.

For Dwight Bullard, much about Scott's education agenda is cause for worry. He is a teacher at a Miami high school and a Democratic representative in the Florida House.

He thinks the governor-elect's plans push Florida schools hard in the wrong direction, and expects others will join in protest as the Legislature debates Scott's education proposals.

"Just put your seat belt on," Bullard said. "It's definitely going to be the likes that we haven't seen in a while."

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