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Cerabino: New state Senate bill exposes steady march of voucher-education in Florida schools

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This one has been coming for years.

The dismantling of public education in Florida has been on a relentless march since former Gov. Jeb Bush hatched an ill-fated plan for an ever-expanding voucher program.

The Florida Supreme Court seemingly put an end to this in 2006, when it ruled that the state's nascent Opportunity Scholarship Program, which funded private tuitions for just 730 former public-school students, was unconstitutional.

"It diverts public dollars into 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," the state's high court opinion read.

But the ruling didn't kill vouchers. It just made voucher entrepreneurs more crafty, and meant that the public dollars being siphoned to private — and often religious — schools would have to be managed with the same bit of clever opacity that drug dealers employ when laundering their riches.

In Florida, that took the form of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program and a group called Step Up for Students, which is organized as a charity.

The idea was simple. Instead of general-revenue tax money going straight to the private schools, it would instead be corporate donations going to the charity Step Up for Students, which would then pass on that money to individuals applying as students looking for grants to the private schools.

This plan would need buy-in from Florida lawmakers, because it works only if those corporations can give these "donations" as one-for-one write-offs on the state taxes they owe. And Step Up for Students would get to skim 3% of those diverted tax dollars for itself in the form of administrative fees for handling the scholarship grants.

To that end, Step Up for Students had its own lobbying arm, the Florida Federation for Students, to flood legislative primaries with campaign cash to finance voucher-sympathetic legislative candidates, particularly in the Democratic primaries.

Doug Tuthill, the founding head of Step Up for Students, couldn't help bragging about what he had created in Florida when speaking in 2011 to a California symposium on the importance of faith-based schools in the school-choice movement.

"Because the Republican Party is fairly solid on our issue, most of the money we're spending is in Democratic primaries," Tuthill 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."

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While Tuthill said the goal is to make every Florida student eligible to use public money for private education, his group realized that for political reasons, it needed to make its pitch all about helping poor kids.

"In a world of finite resources, we focus our resources as a tactical priority on the high-poverty family," he said at that symposium. "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."

These kids were going from public schools with strict accountability to private schools exempt from standardized testing requirements and hiring certified teachers.

When I wrote a column criticizing the legal-money-laundering scholarship program seven years ago, Tuthill answered my column with a column of his own and a defense that focused on the program's mission to help poor kids.

"The state's covenant is to children, not institutions, and these low-income students are being given options their families could not otherwise afford," Tuthill wrote.

His column used the words "low-income" five times. But the program was never ultimately restricted to poor Floridians. It was about slow-walking a universal voucher program to replace public education in one of the biggest states in the country.

And I was far from the only person who saw this coming.

Andrew Coulson, the director of the Cato Institute's Center of Educational Freedom, said at that same symposium that Florida's expansion of private education through public money was bound to have a "domino effect" in the state.

"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.

By last year, the income limits to be eligible for the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program had risen to 260% above the poverty level. More than 100,000 students are in this voucher program, which collects nearly \$1 billion a year in diverted tax payments in a state with 2.8 million public school students.

What started as a tiny voucher program is now a pampered power-player in Florida's educational landscape.

Here's an example: When corporate state income taxes decreased during the economic downturn due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Gov. Ron DeSantis went into his emergency education fund last year to give \$30 million to the scholarship program to shore up its ability to offer scholarships while its corporate-tax funding source has been depleted.

This year, the slow march to the Betsy DeVosification of Florida continues with a Florida Senate bill that would merge the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program with the smaller voucher programs in the state to create "educational savings accounts" for eligible Florida students to use for a variety of expenses beyond tuition and fees –including therapy, after-school and summer-school programs, tutoring, and up to \$750 a year in transportation expenses.

We are nearing the final pot of gold.

The facade of corporations making donations to a private charity would disappear, and instead the state would directly fund these educational saving accounts, which would be managed by Tuthill's Step Up for Students. The group would collect 2.5% as administrative fees and be audited every three years, instead of the current annual audit, according to the bill.

It has been a long, deliberate march to this point.

And we now have a state government completely run by people who are blind to the folly of undermining traditional public education – a long-recognized benchmark of social mobility – for the bottom-line benefit of the education business.

Richard Corcoran, Florida's secretary of education, is a former state legislator whose wife founded a charter school in Pasco County. Corcoran has said he has no problem with cutting traditional public schools in the state by two-thirds.

There are many people who applaud school choice, and imagine it as a cure for failing traditional public schools. But there's a measure of public accountability that's lost once you privatize something or replace publicly elected oversight with unaccountable managers who see education as a temporary business opportunity.

We've seen the disastrous effects of that when the U.S. Military was replaced by a Blackwater militia in Iraq, or when bottom-line-focused private prisons in this country perverted criminal justice by lobbying against sentencing reform.

The dismantling of public education in Florida has been an ongoing project. And it's no secret where it's headed.

Soon, we will all be the poor kids.