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## Bush shaping education in Florida

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TALLAHASSEE - When Sen. David Simmons needed his colleagues' support on the education budget last week, he dropped a powerful name on the Senate floor.

"I had a conversation last week with former Gov. Jeb Bush in which we discussed this and his support of it," Simmons said of the provision to spend \$119 million on reading programs at low-income schools.

The name comes up more than you might think. The former governor, who served from 1999 to 2007, still plays a significant role in shaping state education policy.

This session, Bush and his nonprofit organization, the Foundation for Florida's Future, have helped to fast-track a stream of legislation that could reset the education equation in Florida. The bills, moving steadily through both the House and Senate, could gradually shift the financial and competitive advantage away from traditional public schools to private schools and charter schools, which are often managed by for-profit companies. Other proposals push virtual-learning initiatives.

The foundation says it supports high standards and accountability for all schools: public, charter, private and virtual included. Its supporters say the efforts will lead to dramatic improvements in student achievement - and make the Sunshine State a national leader in education reform.

"It is about equalization," said Sen. Stephen Wise, the Senate Education Committee chairman and a supporter of the foundation's agenda. "We need to challenge the status quo so that parents and children have choices."

Critics, on the other hand, see targeted strikes meant to chip away at Florida's traditional public schools by diverting more tax dollars to private corporations through voucher programs and charter schools.

"There is an attack on public education as we know it," said Rep. Dwight Bullard of Miami, the ranking House Democrat on education issues. "Corporations are looking at it as an opportunity to siphon off dollars."

There is little debate over the influence Bush and the foundation have had in driving the agenda.

"They have huge sway in the Legislature, in part because of Jeb Bush and in part

because they are almost the only game in town," said former state Sen. Dan Gelber a Miami Beach Democrat.

Foundation spokeswoman Jaryn Emhof said it is no secret that Bush stays involved in public policy. The foundation releases a legislative agenda annually - and follows it through the state Legislature and Board of Education.

Bush declined requests to be interviewed for this report.

Since its creation in 1994, the foundation has amassed money and influence, developing close ties to conservative think tanks, including the James Madison Institute, the **Cato Institute** and the Heritage Foundation. At the end of 2010, the organization had nearly \$1 million in assets, the most recent records show.

Among its legislative priorities this year:

- \* A bill that would expand the statewide tax credit cap, enabling more children from low-income families to earn vouchers to attend private schools.

- \* A controversial bill known as the "parent trigger" that would allow parents to demand sweeping changes at low-performing schools. In some cases, parents could petition to have the school converted into a charter.

- \* And a bill that would expand digital learning options.

The foundation has also been pushing for more rigorous student standards - and a tougher school grading formula. The state Board of Education is scheduled to vote on a new formula today. The state's simulations show that the number of F schools under that formula would rise dramatically.

The overall agenda has been controversial. The parent trigger measure, for example, has met fierce resistance from parent groups, who say the bill would benefit for-profit school management companies by giving them access to failing district-run schools.

But when the foundation gets behind an issue, lawmakers usually listen.

"The foundation's policies get carefully considered," said Rep. Bill Proctor, R-St. Augustine, who chairs the House Education Committee.

Last year, the foundation was successful at pushing performance pay for teachers, a measure that the unions had fought back the year before. The foundation also successfully lobbied to make virtual education a requirement for high school graduation.

"They are batting pretty close to 1000 on the issues they put before the Legislature," said Wayne Blanton, executive director for the Florida School Boards Association.

Part of the success stems from political pull.

The foundation's board of directors reads like a who's who of former lawmakers, top education officials and other power brokers. Among them: former Senate President Toni Jennings, former House Speaker Allan Bense, former state Board of Education

Chairman T. Willard Fair and former Board of Governors member Zachariah Zachariah .

Executive director Patricia Levesque is equally influential. Her connections run deep, particularly in the state House, where she once served as staff director of education policy. Her husband, George Levesque, is a staff attorney in the House and has the ear of Speaker Dean Cannon.

Then there's Bush's himself.

Said Simmons, R-Altamonte Springs: "When there are big issues like (the education budget), I contact him and try to get his advice and support. He's very much involved in education policy in the Legislature. His advice is greatly respected."

Democrats are skeptical. "I'm afraid (Bush) is going to co-opt the entire education agenda," Bullard said.