

What Florida is doing to its public schools

By **Valerie Strauss**
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Horace Mann called public education the “great equalizer.” Quite simply, he believed that without a strong system of public schools in this country, the elite would get an education while the middle class and poor would not.

This week, a vote by the Florida State Board of Education makes it nearly impossible for public schools to be “great equalizers” in the Sunshine State. This vote, along with education legislation pending in the state capitol, together threaten the future of Florida’s public schools. The state’s actions are “almost cataclysmic,” [said](#) Okaloosa County Superintendent Alexis Tibbetts.

Horace Mann must be rolling over in his grave.

The proposed legislation, commonly called “[the parent trigger bill](#),” is a vehicle that allows parents of students at low-performing schools (so graded by the state) to petition the state or school district to allow these schools to be taken over by private companies or charter school operators.

Most major parent groups in Florida such as the Florida PTA, Orlando-based Fund Education Now, Support Dade Schools, Save Duval Schools, and 50th No More, oppose this measure. Research shows and parents know that real school improvement comes from strong collaboration with school leaders, teachers, parents and others. Reform should be a collaborative discussion and decision-making process.

In contrast, the [parent trigger](#) is designed to give [private companies](#) and charter management organizations an open invitation to exploit parents and take over schools —

destroying school communities. Rather than a grassroots process, it's an Astroturf mechanism by which companies circulate petitions to take over schools. This idea is being pushed by [former Florida governor Jeb Bush's](#) education foundation, with support from the Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation and the James Madison Institute.

The [parent trigger](#) becomes dangerous for Florida's public schools when it is combined with a State Board of Education rule change adopted this week. Board members changed the grading system for the state's schools, dramatically increasing the number of "F" schools, although not as severely as what was initially planned. Initial projections would have increased the number of schools receiving Fs from 38 to 268 — a 700 percent increase. The new rules will require full inclusion of the scores from the most challenged students, including those in their first year of speaking English, who used to be omitted from the totals, and students with disabilities.

"Schools with 30, 40, 50 or 60 percent of students who are not native English speakers are going to be at a disadvantage in terms of this as a performance metric," Miami-Dade School Superintendent Alberto Carvalho [told The Miami Herald](#). "That does not mean there is not quality instruction taking place in that school."

These changes will immediately demoralize teachers, discourage students and their families and taint the great gains we have made in improving Florida's public schools. Equally significant, the grading change will ensure that more schools are seen as failing, thereby giving additional opportunities for private companies and charter management organizations to take over schools, as provided for in the parent trigger bill.

The trigger bill and the Board of Education's grade change, when considered together, constitute the education equivalent of a land grab. The changes to the grading system would guarantee that Florida's schools, even those heretofore very successful by the state's own definition, would be labeled as failures. The parent trigger bill would then allow corporations to take over the newly designated "failing schools."

Politicians say they are doing this "for the children." The real goal for some state politicians appears to be awarding favored business interests with state tax dollars while stripping a public institution of resources.

Private school operators see \$30 billion in state funds and local property taxes as an untapped market. Private companies would not only get cash flow from every student captured in this process, they'd also get their hands on school land, buildings, equipment and other assets paid for by taxpayers.

Public schools educate all students. Private school operators can toss out students and parents who don't fit their criteria, undermining the efforts of real reformers who work every day to transform diverse, inclusive schools.

The parent trigger law is misnamed as a "Parent Empowerment bill." It should rightly be called the "Corporate Empowerment bill."

Florida parents don't want to see their children become pawns in a political game that benefits out-of-state interests and Tallahassee's corporate friends at the expense of local public schools.

Before any state government pulls the trigger, it should carefully consider the consequences of hitting its target.