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Rick Scott's Plan for Florida: Choice, Charters, Early College and More

By Sean Cavanagh on December 28, 2010 9:00 AM | No comments | No recommendations

Florida school districts would be given a lot more power to hire and fire teachers, and parents would be given access to a lot more taxpayer money to pay for private schools, if the proposals put forward by advisers to governor-in-waiting Rick Scott become reality.

The newly elected Republican's education transition team recently released its [recommendations](#) for school policy, which are chocked full of far-reaching proposals.

One of them is the creation of "education savings accounts," a voucher-type system that Scott had [spoken about](#) somewhat vaguely in recent weeks. His transition team filled in a few key details. Under their proposal, parents would be allowed to receive funding equal to 85 percent of the "amount the student would have generated in the public school system," presumably in per-pupil funding, to pay for private school costs, private tutoring, private virtual education, prepaid college plans, and other options.

And the remaining 15 percent? Scott's team says it would flow back in the public coffers.

"The state will save 15 percent for every public school parent who chooses this option," his team predicts.

Under the direction of former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, Florida became a choice-and-voucher friendly state, one that today offers tax credits to corporations that support private school costs for needy students and provides vouchers to students with disabilities. A broader voucher program, which allowed students in struggling schools to use state money to pay private school tuition, was [ruled unconstitutional](#) by Florida's Supreme Court in 2006. Legal questions would presumably abound regarding the newly proposed voucher expansion. Members of Scott's transition team seem aware of the constitutional questions, noting in their written recommendations that the proposed savings accounts are not recommended as a replacement for tax credits, "since tax-credit funding remains the safest legal structure for choice programs."

But even some voucher supporters wonder if the new choice proposal goes too far, as the *St. Petersburg Times* [notes](#). One concern among those advocates is why a middle- or upper-income family should receive taxpayer money to cover a child's cost at a private or religious school. The Cato Institute's Andrew Coulson, who backs vouchers, [questions](#) whether the proposal would stand up in court.

Scott's transition team also calls for changes in how teachers are paid and evaluated, and in the job protections they receive. The team proposes removing teacher evaluations from the collective bargaining process; having at least 50 percent of teachers' evaluations based on a "multiple year review of student progress," which is supposed to align with the state's winning [Race to the Top plan](#); eliminating tenure for newly hired K-12 teachers; requiring that both principals and teachers sign off on a teacher being placed in a school; and requiring parental consent for student placement in classrooms of teachers who rated ineffective. A lot of Floridians expect the legislature to attempt to make some of those changes through a revival of some form of Senate Bill 6, the controversial merit-pay-and-tenure bill that died with a swipe of outgoing Gov. Charlie Crist's veto pen.

In addition, Scott's team calls for creating a system that designates "high-performing charter schools," and gives them more flexibility and funding. Another proposal would give students who graduate early from high school a college scholarship equal to 50 percent of the amount the state would have spent on them during the last year of high school.

Scott's focus on vouchers, and changing the rules on how teachers are judged and paid probably isn't surprising, given the makeup of his transition staff. It includes [Patricia Levesque](#), who served as former Gov. Bush's deputy chief of staff for education, and who now works as executive director for two of his school-focused foundations. The team also includes [Michelle Rhee](#), who until recently was chancellor of the District of Columbia's schools and generated a wave of publicity, in part by pushing for changes in how teachers were evaluated and paid.

Of course, the ideas put forward are only "recommendations," as the title of the document makes clear. Florida's state legislature is dominated by Republicans, many of whom are probably keen on Scott's proposals. But they also may have education recommendations of their own.

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