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Local leaders question governor-elect's school-voucher reform plan

By LINDA TRIMBLE, Education Writer

Ideas

Some of the recommendations by Gov.-elect Rick Scott's education transition team:

• Implementation of a new teacher-evaluation system, based partly on student progress

• Elimination of tenure for new K-12 teachers

• "Education savings accounts" would give public-school parents control over 85% of funding used to put their children through public school; could be used for virtual school, private school, private tutoring, college expenses

DAYTONA BEACH -- Vouchers for all students. Merit pay for teachers, but no tenure for new hires.

Those are just a few of the wide-ranging recommendations for reforming Florida's education system released this week by an 18-member panel advising Gov.-elect Rick Scott on his transition to becoming the state's chief executive officer on Jan. 4.

Some recommendations like merit pay for teachers have been hotly debated in Florida and across the nation in recent years while others -- like the all-inclusive voucher proposal -- take the debate to a new level.

The 20-page report, which Scott is still reviewing to decide which ideas he might adopt, is drawing mixed reactions from local school officials, teachers unions, lawmakers and education policy experts.

The voucher proposal is attracting much of the attention. It would allow parents of public school students to receive payments equal to 85 percent of the funding the student would have generated in the public schools for "education savings accounts."

That money -- about \$5,800 per student this year -- then could be used for private school tuition, online courses or tutoring; dual enrollment college courses and their books; and designated college savings and prepaid tuition plans.

Parents would be encouraged to "shop for high-quality, low-cost education alternatives so they can save for their child's college, while also saving the state money," according to the report. It also recommends parents of home-schooled students receive online resources and support equal in value to the funding their child would have generated in a public school.

Both state Sen. Evelyn Lynn, R-Ormond Beach, and Volusia School Board member Candace Lankford questioned where the money would come from to fund such a proposal and how those who receive it would be held accountable for its use.

"I think this is going way beyond what I ever expected we would be doing with vouchers," said Lynn, a former educator who serves on both Senate education appropriations committees. "I don't think there is adequate accountability."

"It may sound wonderful on paper, but you talk about a government giveaway with no accountability," said Lankford, who's also president of the Florida School Boards Association.

Volusia Teachers Organization President Andrew Spar accused the transition team of "trying to set things up so we can dismantle public education."

"They're trying to do education on the cheap and our children are too important to do it on the cheap," he said.

Meanwhile, a policy analyst for a Washington think tank who has long supported vouchers has issued a memo suggesting the plan recommended by Scott's team couldn't possibly pass muster with the Florida Supreme Court. And, said Andrew Coulson of the Cato Institute, that could end up jeopardizing the future of two existing Florida school voucher programs for children from low-income families and those with disabilities.

Volusia School Superintendent Margaret Smith and Flagler Superintendent Janet Valentine said the local districts are already working -- in conjunction with their teachers unions -- on merit-pay plans and have expanded school choice options in recent years.

Smith said she hopes Scott and lawmakers will seek input from all education stakeholders before deciding on what changes to make. Whatever plan Scott ultimately adopts, Valentine said: "I just hope it's a solid plan and it doesn't undermine the very thing we're trying to do, and that's providing all students with a quality education."

Lynn, the state senator from Ormond Beach, advised Scott to exercise some caution as he's sworn into public office for the first time. "A lot of these things have merit," she said of the education transition plan, "but you can't just do it tomorrow. If you do it carelessly, you will be hurting (students)."

-- Staff Writer Annie Martin contributed to this report.

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