

Why Does Parental Choice Stop at the Schoolhouse Door?

By J. Robert McClure – August 2006

Now that the school year begins in mid-August, most families' vacations and lazy days are giving way to a daily grind. By now most parents – especially those with younger kids – have had to make dozens of decisions about matters ranging from transportation and extracurricular activities to school clothing and supplies.

Those are choices that help parents manage their time and finances as they seek to raise their children the best way they know how. Yet there is one choice that many parents are not allowed to make concerning their children's future.

Although Florida has been at the forefront of the school choice movement, which emphasizes accountability on the part of schools to parents rather than entrenched bureaucracies, foes of this movement have been moving aggressively.

Indeed, after a state Senate schism doomed plans to let Floridians vote on a constitutional amendment to allow school vouchers, parental choice supporters wondered which program would be the next target of the teachers unions and their allies.

The answer wasn't long in coming. Critics now have turned their attention the state's pre-kindergarten program, which allows parents of four-year-olds to choose among various providers – including those affiliated with religious organizations.

For instance, the ACLU's Florida Director Howard Simon told the *Palm Beach Post*, "With the pre-K program, you have young, impressionable minds subjected to religious doctrine."

Meanwhile, various pundits have been urging a further expansion of the state's voluntary pre-K program – preferably in the public schools. A Tallahassee Democrat editorial was typical: "The public schools know how to make such programs run; but pre-K is in the hands of private providers who are now in the mode of reinventing the wheel."

It seems that many in Florida believe that having pre-K emulate the one-size-fits-all approach of the K-12 system will best serve the needs of our state's nearly 220,000 four-year-olds.

Don't believe it. I have two daughters who are as different in personality as they are unique in DNA. Because of their wonderful differences, they attend two different schools.

If two youngsters in a single family can be so different in their educational needs, just imagine the differences among those 220,000 four-year-olds. Why, then, should we subject them to a single, government-run system devoid of competition, choice and accountability to parents?

Regardless of the Senate's unseemly food fight over the voucher amendment, which lost not on the merits but because of a witch's brew of raw politics, outsized egos, and intimidation, it is clear that when parents are able to choose the program – public or private -- that best fits the needs of each child, Floridians *and* school districts benefit.

Institutions as disparate as Harvard University, the Wall Street Journal, and the Hoover Institution agree. They attribute Florida's rising test scores, higher graduation rates, and improving public schools to the beneficial combination of choice and accountability.

Indeed, I would argue that one reason public schools have improved on statewide tests is that Florida has seen fit to offer families more choices than are typically available in other states.

Ironically, shortly after calls for a one-size-fits-all prescription for pre-K, many newspapers across the state called for more choice in the cable television market, arguing that competition will lower costs and improve choice.

One editorial went on to cite shopping for washing machines and cell phones as times when "you'd compare prices, models, and manufacturers offered by different retailers, then make your purchase depending on what best suits your needs."

Logically then, choice, competition, and accountability are good for washing machines and cell phones, but not for schools? Sen. Al Lawson (D-Tallahassee) had it right when he said during the recent legislative session, "Don't their parents have a right, when paying taxes, to have their kids get the best education?"

What's the message of many of those who are pushing for the public school version of "universal pre-K" – and, incidentally, for squeezing out the private providers, where the teachers don't pay union dues?

Essentially they're telling parents -- adults who are allowed to make decisions on crucial matters ranging from mortgages to life-or-death choices about medical treatment -- that they aren't qualified to choose the best school for their child, so choices won't be offered.

Engaging our children in education early in their lives can make a huge difference later on. It's bad enough that most parents are denied a choice for their children in grades K-12. Now, if many in the universal pre-K crowd get their wish, parents will also have little or no say about pre-K, an important opening chapter in many children's lives.

Bob McClure is President and CEO of The James Madison Institute, a non-partisan policy center based in Tallahassee and devoted to advocating the free-market principles of limited government, individual liberty, and personal responsibility.

