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Reclaiming Florida's Lost Opportunity

By Greg Forster & Bob McClure

The Florida Legislature has the opportunity this session to expand the Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship Program as well as expand and protect the Florida Virtual School. While not replacements for the state's lost Opportunity Scholarship Program, the first would provide thousands more low-income children with the chance to attend a school that best meets their needs, and the latter would provide more students with access to a wider variety of courses and/or choice in instructional delivery method.

A 2008 empirical study co-sponsored by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, the Foundation for Excellence in Education, and The James Madison Institute examined the impact of ending the Opportunity Scholarship Program, which offered vouchers so that children assigned to chronically underperforming schools could transfer to another public or private school of their choice.

The vouchers were a key component of Florida's A+ Accountability Program, which grades each public school based on its performance. Until the Florida Supreme Court's 2006 ruling, if a school received two failing grades in any four consecutive years, its students were eligible for vouchers.

The A+ vouchers were famous in education circles for yielding improvements in failing public schools. Four separate sets of studies, including researchers at Harvard, Princeton, Cornell, the Manhattan Institute, and the Urban Institute, have found that the A+ program produced especially dramatic improvements in 2002-03, the first year when vouchers were offered to a substantial number of students.

Many people are surprised to hear that vouchers improve public schools. But empowering parents to choose their children's schools allows them to hold schools accountable and creates healthy competition among schools. That's why the research nationwide consistently shows that vouchers improve public schools, and no empirical study has ever found that vouchers made public schools worse.

Surprisingly, though, until the Friedman *et al.* study, nobody seems to have conducted empirical research on the effects of Florida's A+ vouchers since 2002-03.

What the 2008 study found was that the impact of the A+ program changed from year to year in ways that corresponded to the status of vouchers. Before vouchers were widely available,

the A+ program produced moderate improvements in failing public schools.

When vouchers became widely available in 2002-03, it produced dramatic improvements. In subsequent years, voucher participation rates declined, and the positive impact of the program was less dramatic. Finally, with no vouchers in 2006-07, the benefits of the A+ program were reduced again – to lower than where they were even before the dramatic gains of 2002-03.

This should put to rest any doubts about whether the competitive incentives from vouchers were an important part of the program's success in improving public schools. All the alternative possibilities – such as a response to the stigma of the failing grade – were equally present in every year, while the status of vouchers changed from year to year. The impact of the program also changed, sometimes dramatically, from year to year – and the changes track the changes in the status of vouchers.

One interesting question is why the voucher participation rates declined after 2002-03. It is worth noting that the A+ program is the only school choice program in the country – out of 24 total – to show a long-term decline in participation rates.

The clear culprit is the artificial obstacles to participation that were created by the Florida Department of Education in administering the program. The department gave parents only two weeks after school grades were announced to apply for vouchers or lose their eligibility forever. Making matters worse, the announcements were not made on a predictable schedule.

Any voucher program built on a “failing schools” model is going to have difficulty keeping eligible parents informed. But in Florida, thanks to the

unreasonable way in which the department administered the program, it is likely that most eligible parents didn't even know they were eligible until it was too late for them to apply.

No school choice program anywhere else imposes participation barriers like the ones imposed in Florida. Policy makers should take note: Don't let the guardians of public education's status quo be the ones in control of parents' access to vouchers.

The results of this analysis, finding that the loss of vouchers is a stinging blow to students in Florida's failing public schools, show all the more clearly the outrage of the court's decision to strike them down. The decision in that case was riddled with errors of fact, fallacies of logic, and internal contradictions.

The judges clearly had no regard for either the facts or the law. Now we have the data showing the results of their arrogance: lost opportunity for students in failing public schools. Florida's voters and policy makers should heed this evidence and take steps to restore that opportunity in whatever form, whether it be corporate scholarships or virtual classes.

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