



# Why Expanding Education Choice Should Be Florida Voters' Top K-12 Priority

William Mattox

DIRECTOR OF THE J. STANLEY MARSHALL CENTER FOR  
EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS, THE JAMES MADISON INSTITUTE

*Sitting on a sofa on a Sunday afternoon  
Going to the candidates' debate  
Laugh about it, shout about it  
When you've got to choose  
Every way you look at this, you lose.*

*From "Mrs. Robinson," lyrics by Paul Simon*

When Floridians go to the candidates' debates this fall – or sit at home and watch them from their sofa – they'll no doubt find plenty to laugh and shout about. But they'll also very likely find they have a lot to lose in this year's election.

No, Florida's political situation isn't nearly as dire or as hopeless as the situation Simon and Garfunkel sang about. In fact, in many respects, the greatest challenge our state faces is complacency.

After years and years of good governance – not perfect governance, certainly, but better-than-most-states governance – Florida could very easily take a wrong turn this fall. To the detriment of us all. And perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than in education policy.

### **Two Innovative Leaps Forward, One Myopic Push Back**

Over the last two decades, a remarkable transformation has taken place in the way Florida approaches K-12 education. Increasingly, we are moving away from a one-size-fits-all "macro" system that is focused on funneling masses of children through state-run educational factories. And we are moving towards a highly-personalized "micro" system that is allowing parents to choose, from an array of educational

options, the learning program(s) best suited to their particular child.

As a result, Florida now boasts more charter school students and more private school scholarship recipients than any other state. In addition, the Sunshine State is now home to the largest K-12 virtual school in the country and to the largest annual homeschooling convention in the world.

So, more Florida students are learning in non-traditional environments than ever before. And thanks in part to this educational diversity – and to the healthy competition it provokes – a rising tide has been lifting all student boats.

Consider, for example, the results of the latest National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), commonly referred to as "our nation's report card," which were released this spring. Only one state – Florida – showed significant learning gains in all four categories measured (4th and 8th grade math, 4th and 8th grade reading). And this was hardly the first time Florida had distinguished itself on the national stage. In fact, a 2012 study by a research team comprised of scholars from Stanford and Harvard found that Florida produced greater learning gains than any other state (except Massachusetts) over the two-decade span dating back to 1991.

Now, in the wake of this impressive record, one would think that all of Florida's current – and aspiring – leaders would be committed to continuing the positive direction in K-12 education. Sadly, however, many of the people aspiring for leadership positions in Florida government remain strongly committed to the myopic public-school regime that routinely opposes the continued expansion of student learning options.

Two scenes from this past legislative session illustrate the often-absurd lengths to which this existing establishment – and its legislative defenders – will go.

Seven days before the Parkland school massacre, a parade of lobbyists from the Florida Education Association, the Southern Poverty Law Center, and other organizations lambasted a Hope Scholarship proposal to aid student victims of bullying, sexual harassment, and violent assault.

Championed by Rep. Byron Donalds (R-Naples), the Hope Scholarship (which Gov. Rick Scott signed into law in March) gives student victims the option of transferring to a different school – public or private – with the financial resources needed to make this happen. This last provision, offering a scholarship that parents could take to a private school they consider safer for their child, elicited the education establishment's ire.

Now, in fairness, no one at that time could have possibly imagined the horror that was about to befall Marjory Stoneman Douglas High. And I'm sure there's now plenty of post-massacre regret from the numskull who said that the proposed Hope Scholarship teaches student victims to "run away and hide" rather than remaining in a

potentially-dangerous situation.

Still, the opposition to this student safety scholarship was surprising – especially when it did not subside after the Parkland massacre. In fact, less than a month after the shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School, a pair of Florida senators – from Broward County no less – tried to strip the Hope Scholarship proposal from an omnibus education package.

Like the FEA, the senators objected to the scholarship program partly because it allowed faith-based schools to be among the options available to bullying victims looking for a new learning environment. This opposition seemed unusually ironic, given that one of these Broward senators had led a very noble (and successful) fight earlier in the session to have legendary educator Mary McLeod Bethune represent Florida in the U.S. Capitol's Statuary Hall.

Bethune, it should be recalled, founded the private, faith-based school for African-American girls that grew into what is today Bethune-Cookman University. So, apparently, the good senator wants Florida schoolchildren to learn all about Ms. Bethune – so long as they are denied the opportunity to attend a K-12 school like the one she founded.

Sadly, leaders of the public-school establishment not only want to squelch all market-based reforms in K-12 education, but they also want to perpetuate the myth that virtually every problem in education can be fixed by spending more public money, especially on teachers.

Obviously, some money is needed to provide a high-quality education. And, certainly, teachers ought to be compensated much like other professionals.

Yet, ironically, the public education unions actually stand in the way of teachers being paid like professionals. Consider this little thought experiment:

1. Have you (or your children) ever had a teacher about whom you would say, “Whatever they’re paying that teacher, it isn’t enough?” Virtually every person I’ve ever asked has known such a teacher.
2. Have you (or your children) ever had a teacher about whom you would say, “Whatever they’re paying that teacher, it is way too much?” Again, virtually every person I’ve ever asked has known such a teacher.
3. Do you think the first teacher that came to your mind should earn more than the second teacher that came to your mind? Virtually every person I’ve ever asked has said, “Of course.” Yet, the teachers unions, bizarrely, object to the notion of merit-based pay. They don’t believe that teachers should be treated like other professionals who are paid according to performance. Indeed, if other professional unions adopted the unfair labor practices that the teachers unions promote, LeBron James would earn no more money than any of the four “non-LeBrons” that take the court each night with him. (In fact, LeBron wouldn’t even make more than the last man on the bench if he had to play by the FEA’s rules.)

This little thought experiment helps to illustrate that when it comes to K-12 education, how much a state spends isn’t nearly as important as how well a state spends. Accordingly, states that operate according to market principles – by fostering competition between various schooling options and rewarding excellence and success – tend to produce better student outcomes, all things being equal, than states that offer one-size-fits-all government schooling.

Indeed, interestingly, when it comes to delivering bang-for-buck in education, Florida – surprise, surprise – ranks #1 in the country. And it isn’t even close.

That 2012 Stanford-Harvard study referenced earlier found that Florida achieved its astounding student learning gains during the 1990s and early 2000s while increasing per-pupil spending less than any other state. In other words, Florida did a better job than any other state in avoiding the “law of diminishing returns,” where increases in spending do not translate into better student outcomes (and, in fact, often hinder progress by exacerbating the problems associated with one-size-fits-all schooling).

Moreover, a soon-to-be-released state-by-state study of K-12 education by scholars at the University of Texas at Dallas shows that Florida remains among the nation’s leaders – not just in delivering steady growth in student NAEP scores, but also in delivering bang-for-buck in K-12 education. More than any other state, Florida comes closest to providing what we all seek whenever we go shopping for any product or service – the highest possible quality at the lowest possible price.

## The Most Important Question

The single most important education-related question, then, that Floridians should ask candidates for public office is not whether they support greater K-12 spending and across-the-board pay increases for teachers. The single most important question is this: Do you support or oppose the continued expansion of education choice in our state so that all Florida parents soon will have the opportunity to enroll their child in the school that best suits his or her learning needs?

Lest there be any doubt, many Florida families do not enjoy such choice today. Despite all the progress that has been made

over the last two decades, many "forgotten Floridians" have yet to taste school choice because they earn too much to qualify for low-income scholarships yet earn too little to afford private school tuition or the cost of housing in "good" school zones.

It's time to remember these "forgotten Floridians" by expanding the eligibility of scholarship programs to include more K-12 students. This should be the #1 education priority of the next Florida governor and Florida legislature. And it should be the #1 education-related item Floridians look for when they attend this year's candidates debates – or when they sit at home and watch them from their sofas.