



## Vouchers Boost Achievement

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Unfortunately, in a recent editorial regarding the Taxation and Budget Reform Commission, the St. Petersburg Times employs worn-out diversionary tactics to obfuscate the issues and conceal its true position - the paper's editorial board despises the concept of providing school choice options to low-income students. Let's end the theatrics and address the real questions going before the Florida people on November's ballot. This debate is on keeping the promise of a quality education for all of Florida's students.

Florida students are no longer just competing with students in Georgia, California, New York and Texas for coveted high-wage jobs. They are competing with their peers around the world. Countries like China, Sweden and Singapore are focusing on tomorrow's economy and placing a premium on education and innovation to ensure they can keep pace with their rivals. For decades, America set that pace, and now we are falling behind.

We need all schools - here and in the 49 other states - to get better for our country's future. The only way to improve student performance is through continual and perpetual reform of education. Florida needs a 21st century education system for a 21st century world, and school choice can be an important catalyst to make this vision a reality.

Just 10 years ago, Florida schools were failing and our students routinely scored at the bottom in the nation on standardized tests. Vouchers were one of the tools that dramatically improved student achievement and spurred a turnaround. We created Opportunity

Scholarships to give low-income families access to high-performing schools - regardless of whether they were public, private or religious. Poor families were afforded the same opportunity as affluent families who have the money to make the choice. The successful program provided options for students in chronically failing schools and created competition that improved low-performing public schools. Choice wasn't just for the elite, and all schools got better.

Under a system of high standards, accountability and competition, Florida has made great progress. Nearly a quarter of a million more children are reading at or above grade level today than a decade ago. Florida is scoring above the national average in reading and math. The achievement gap for minorities is narrowing, with increasing numbers of African-Americans and Hispanics making the grade. High standards are working and accountability is working. But it is not enough.

Unfortunately, quality is not a concern of the court system. Despite contributing to unprecedented student learning gains, the voucher program was struck down as unconstitutional by a state appellate court in 2002 and by the Florida Supreme Court in 2006.

The Florida appellate court ruled that state-funded vouchers represented "indirect support" of a religious institution - even though the state was actually paying for a service, not funding a particular dogma. If applied without discrimination, as sought by teachers unions and liberal special interest groups, this ruling would end public funding of dozens of programs across a spectrum of policy areas.

The Florida Supreme Court ruled that vouchers for private schools violated a constitutional requirement that public education be "uniform." Under this tortured reasoning, a better education from a private school was unconstitutional just because it was different than the education provided by a public school.

Fortunately, the state's Taxation and Budget Reform Commission took action last week to address the concerns of the courts and place these important issues before Florida voters in November. Voters will decide whether to embrace religious freedom or deny faith-based organizations a seat at the table.

And voters will ultimately decide the best way to provide a quality education. Do we give parents choices and trust that they know what is best for their child's education, or do we trust a regressive government monopoly of our public school system to meet the unique needs of every Florida child?

St. Petersburg Times, please throw away the tired rhetoric. Our urgency should be focused on providing a world-class quality of education to prepare all Florida students to succeed in the competitive global marketplace. Too much is at stake.

Jeb Bush is the former governor of Florida.