



Ex-Union Chief Leads Voucher Program

By Ron Matus, Times Staff Writer

Published Sunday, September 14, 2008

Doug Tuthill is the new president of the Florida School Choice Fund, which raises money for the state's \$118-million corporate tax credit voucher program and awards vouchers to low-income children. He's also a former teacher and president of the Pinellas County teachers union, and he helped start the International Baccalaureate program at St. Petersburg High.

Why did you take this job?

I'm a passionate believer in equal opportunity in education. I'm excited by the fact that this program is providing more opportunity for low-income families. I think providing more diversity for learning options for families increases the possibility that more kids will be successful.

What does it say about the political dynamics on the issue of vouchers that you're a former teachers union leader and now you're heading up the biggest voucher organization in Florida?

What you're finding is that people are increasingly less interested in fighting and more interested in helping kids. There has been a lot of division in this state, a lot of contentious debates in the education world. Spending time fighting each other doesn't really help children. ...

I want to bring people together and urge them to stop fighting. I don't think the enemy is educators or parents or public schools or private schools. The enemy is ignorance and poverty and hopelessness and despair.

You have been critical of vouchers. You wrote in the 1990s that vouchers were "based on false assumptions and faulty logic." When did you change your view on vouchers and why?

I've never changed my views on school choice. I've never changed my views on my passionate commitment to public education. And frankly, I've never changed my views on the importance of teachers working together, through teachers unions, to improve public education. There are public-private partnerships that I would oppose today. It really depends on the nature of that program ...

When we first started the IB program at St. Pete High, it was very controversial. It was one of the first choice voucher programs around ... Our argument was all we're trying to do is create more learning options (for kids). Over time, the IB program became less and less controversial. And after 10 years or so, it was accepted as the normal part of the strengthening of public school education. That's what's happening (with charter schools, virtual schools and vouchers). ...

What are your biggest goals for the organization in the near future?

What I'd like to do is maximize the options and choices that are available to low-income and working-class families. I'm really interested in expanding the pool of opportunities out there and working with partners on making that happen. I'd really like to build a broad-based coalition and keep the momentum that happened during the last session (where Democrats and Republicans worked together on some education issues). We're going to reach out to everybody.