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Chicken Littles of School Choice Were Wrong

By Matthew Berry

Last year, opponents of school choice ran around Florida like Chicken Little, predicting that the sky would fall if parents of children assigned to failing public schools were given the option of using their share of state education funds to send their children to private schools.

Opportunity scholarships, or vouchers, we were told, would sound the death knell for the state's public education system. After Governor Bush's opportunity scholarship program passed the Florida House of Representatives, leading choice opponent Rep. Debbie Wasserman-Schultz lamented, "This is the day that will go down in the annals of Florida history as the day we abandoned our public schools and the day that we abandoned, more importantly, our children."

While those hostile to opportunity scholarships argued that choice would harm all public schools, they were particularly concerned about how vouchers would impact failing public schools and the children who stayed in those schools. Dorothy Inman Crews of the Children's Defense Fund, stated quite bluntly: "The low-performing students will be left behind in the garbage heap. And those schools will be allowed to go to the dogs."

Congressman Jim Davis similarly predicted, "Under this new system, you have ensured the inevitable failure of many of our struggling schools." And Florida Senate Minority Leader Buddy Dyer argued that Governor Bush's plan "abandon[ed] students left behind in low-performing schools."

After the opportunity scholarship program's first year of operation, however, these doomsday scenarios have not come to pass. Recently released test scores from the Florida Department of Education show that choice has worked. The threat of competition has improved Florida's worst public schools. In short, the sky has not fallen. The only thing that has fallen is the number of failing public schools.

Last year, 78 schools received "F" grades from the Florida Department of Education, due to students' scores on the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT). The FCAT revealed that most students in these failing schools were not meeting state standards in any one of three core subjects: reading, writing, and mathematics.

Students assigned to two of these schools were eligible for the opportunity scholarship program as these schools had received their second failing grade in a four-

year period. For the rest of the schools on the failing list, another "F" this year meant that their students would be eligible for opportunity scholarships.

With the prospect of competition on the horizon, failing public school implemented a flurry of reforms in the hopes of raising student achievement, in the form of school improvement plans presented to the Department of Education. While individual schools utilized different strategies, many shared common elements.

More time was spent teaching the basics. Schools instituted special reading blocks and math blocks. In some cases, tutoring was offered after school or on Saturdays. In other cases, hours were added to the school day or days were added to the school year. Instructional methods were also changed, with a greater emphasis on phonics and other promising approaches for teaching children to read.

The results produced by these reforms are nothing short of remarkable. The Florida Department of Education announced last month that every single one of last year's 78 failing schools demonstrated significant improvement on the FCAT. Consequently, none of these 78 schools reappeared on this year's list of failing schools, and only 4 schools were on the list at all.

The improvement at the two schools where students were eligible for opportunity scholarships last year was even more astounding. Last year, only 28 percent at A.A. Dixon Elementary School and 41 percent of students at Spencer Bibbs Elementary School passed the state's writing test. This year, the figures were 94 percent and 85 percent respectively.

So much for these schools "going to the dogs" or the state "abandoning the students left behind in low-performing schools." The test results demonstrate the opposite: the threat of competition has been good for public schools and especially those students who had been assigned to failing schools.

It is probably too much to expect choice opponents to admit they were wrong, but perhaps their overheated rhetoric will at least begin to cool. While Chicken Little was able to convince Henny Penny and all of his friends that the sky was falling, those opposed to the opportunity scholarship program will no longer be able to persuade voters that choice is bad for public schools for the facts now tell the opposite story.

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