

Protect Our Public Schools, Manasota

What is Protect Our Public Schools, Manasota?

Protect Our Public Schools (POPS), Manasota was established in the summer of 2017 to address the growing threat of school privatization in Sarasota and Manatee Counties. The group formed shortly after the passage of Florida House Bill-7069, also referred to as School of Hope bill, because members were extremely concerned about the draconian nature of that legislation that took millions of dollars from Districts' capital budgets, transferring funds to charter schools. It also authorized the replacement of public schools labeled as "failing schools" as determined by high stakes standardized testing with corporate managed charter schools. One critic called this bill, the "death knell of public education." POPS official mission is that "free, quality public education is a right for all children and is necessary for the optimal functioning of a democratic society. POPS opposes the privatization of public education."

What does POPS mean by school privatization?

Florida is the national leader in the privatization of public education. The State of Florida is spending nearly \$1-billion on tax credit scholarships, which are essentially school vouchers to mostly religiously-based (70%) private schools. Florida has an ever-growing percentage of students attending charter schools. While charter schools are considered to be "public schools," charter schools in reality meet the definition of an outsourced school in that they receive public funds in order to provide a defined service, in this case education, but have limited accountability. POPS differentiates between parent and community-initiated charter schools and corporate-managed charter schools. While all charter schools syphon off needed funds and resources from traditional public schools, POPS sees corporate managed schools as a particular threat to public education. These large corporations are profit-making, and often engage in real estate boondoggles and frequently work with groups like the Koch brothers and corporate funded foundations that explicitly organize to eliminate public education.

How has school privatization affected Sarasota and Manatee County School Districts?

As a result of HB-7069 from the 2016-17 legislative session, both Sarasota and Manatee County School Districts lost millions of dollars from their capital budgets in the 2017-18 school year. After an outcry from districts, the state legislature reversed this in HB-7055, giving charter schools capital funds directly from the state budget. Under HB-7069, both districts lost some funding from Title One programs. The bill would allow "schools of hope," run by for-profit charter school management companies, to replace traditional public schools that have earned either an F or D grade from the state for three consecutive years. At least two elementary schools are at risk for this takeover in Manatee County. HB-7055, expanded the tax credit to include children who were bullied and/or intimidated, allowing them to receive tax-credit funded vouchers paid by diverted sales tax monies. In addition growing numbers of children from both counties are attending private schools through the Florida tax-credit scholarship program. Many of these children eventually return to the public districts, frequently well behind their peers.

Why has school privatization become such an important issue in Florida in recent years?

Florida has emerged as the leading state in the US in implementing school privatization. Former Governor Jeb Bush made "school choice" a primary goal of his Administration. Governor Scott has continued expanding school privatization and both houses of the Florida legislature are fully behind it. Betsy DeVos, President Trump's pick for US Secretary of Education and a multi-billionaire who has spent millions of dollars supporting school privatization, has visited Florida schools ten times in 2017 alone to showcase charter schools and particularly tax-credit scholarship-funded private schools. The Florida tax-credit scholarship program, the largest in the nation, is legislatively scheduled to grow at an unprecedented 25% annual rate. Although initially intended for only low-income families, the eligibility income levels have expanded as has the size of the scholarship. At the current 25% growth rate, the scholarship program in less than 20 years could be larger than today's entire public school education budget. Meanwhile, the per student allocation for public schools has barely budged over the past 10 years and at \$7408 (and if fact has decreased by 16% in real dollars) is one of the lowest per student allocations in the nation.

How does POPS hope to address the threat of privatization in area schools?

POPS is an education and advocacy organization that holds regular meetings addressing the issues of privatization and related issues. Initially formed by a group of mostly retired educators from all over the country but now residing in Sarasota and Manatee counties, it has grown into a group that is attracting parents, current educators and members of the public who are in support of quality education. POPS members attend and monitor local school board meetings and keep abreast of state and federal education legislation. POPS is particularly concerned about the growing use of “dark money,” funds often anonymously collected from corporations and wealthy individuals, and used to support candidates that are of benefit to the wealthy. The use of “dark money” has corrupted State legislators and, locally, has gotten supporters of school privatization elected to school boards.

Does POPS focus on other educational issues besides school privatization?

Yes, POPS equally focuses on improving public education for all children. Florida schools are significantly underfunded and education staff underpaid. As poverty has increased and the social safety net unraveled, schools today are addressing tasks that used to be addressed by families and communities. POPS supports: an increase of per-pupil funding allocation to at least the national average; a significant increase in teacher salaries; a return to teacher-directed assessment rather than high stakes testing; further reductions in class sizes; an expansion of quality universal infant and preschool programs; and the implementation of societal measures that reduce poverty. In an era of structural economic changes where quality jobs are disappearing and large-scale automation expanding, education must address such changes by emphasizing critical thinking skills through teacher-directed culturally relevant curriculum that is highly individualized and child-centered with a strong grounding in the sciences and the arts.

What are the alternatives to school privatization?

Massive investment into public education is critical. An important study (*Privatization of Public Investment in Education*) by the Stanford Center of Policy in Education, looked at differences in outcomes for countries that supported a privatized education model versus countries that invested heavily in public education. Of all the pairings in the study, the pairing of Sweden versus Finland is especially interesting and presents a cautionary tale. Nearly 20 years ago, Sweden, following the election of a conservative government, privatized their very good education system, replacing it with a voucher-based system. Over 50% of public schools shut down and were replaced with private, mostly for-profit, unregulated schools. Teacher salaries plummeted across the board, vacation time was reduced and staff prep time was eliminated, replaced with standardized teaching methods and testing. Experienced teachers left the system in droves. During roughly the same time period, Finland took a very different approach investing heavily in education, by making college training programs rigorous and selective and paying teachers very high salaries, making the profession respected on par with medicine and law. Additionally, teachers were given considerable autonomy yet cooperation amongst teaching staff and between schools was encouraged. A child-centered approach to pedagogy, including frequent breaks for play, was implemented and teacher-developed assessments were used rather than standardized tests. The end result is that Finland has consistently scored at or near the top level on the only standardized test administered, the PISA test (Program for International Student Assessment). Finland has been cited as an education model worldwide while Sweden’s scores and the quality of education programming has plummeted. In the US studies of full service community schools—where schools become community centers and additional funding and services are placed into low performing schools—have also shown positive results.

Where and When does POPS meet?

Protect our Public Schools (POPS), Manasota meets at **6 pm on the third Tuesday of the month at Sarasota North Library**, 2801 Newtown Blvd., Sarasota.

POPS meetings and public forums are announced on the activist calendar: (www.criticaltimes.org)

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