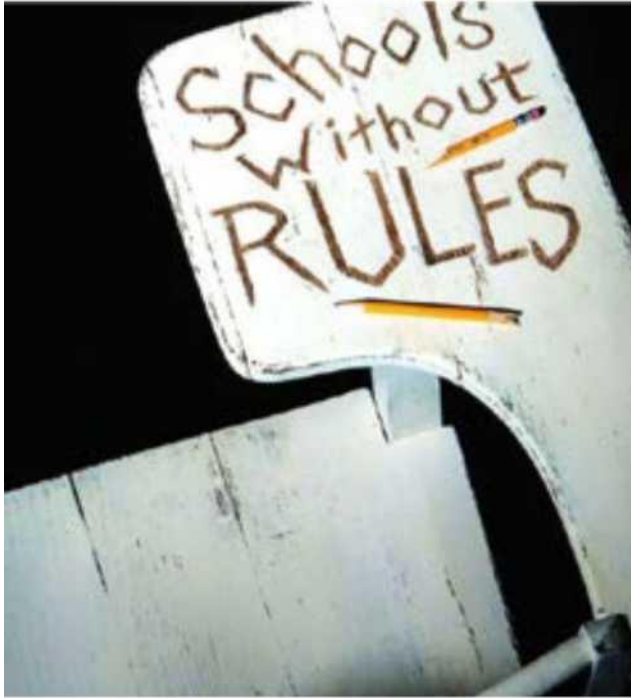


Voucher Schools in Sarasota

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Last year, the Orlando Sentinel published an in- depth series of articles, aptly called Schools Without Rules, on private schools in Central Florida receiving Florida school voucher funding. The articles were a scathing indictment of the Florida voucher programs that drain more than \$1billion from public education through six different voucher programs.

The Sentinel reporters found that there was little oversight/accountability of Florida's "scholarship" programs for private schools. Some schools hired teachers without college degrees, hired staff with criminal and sex-offending records, held classes in aging strip malls, falsified fire or health records and taught curriculum that denounced evolution, using illustrations in a science textbook that show men and dinosaurs together.

More recently, the Sentinel exposed how more than 80 private Christian Schools receiving Florida school voucher funds had discriminated against LGTBQ students and their families. For example, Calvary Christian High School in Clearwater denies admission to students if they, or someone in their home, are practicing a "homosexual lifestyle or alternative gender identity" or "promoting such practices."

The Orlando Sentinel spent months reporting on Florida's scholarship programs in 2017. They reviewed thousands of pages of Florida Department of Education documents, court records and other materials in addition to interviewing dozens of people, including parents, students, school operators and policy experts. The series is still available for download from the POPS Website.

If you think this abuse and outrageous behavior perpetuated by voucher-funded schools is limited to the Orlando area, think again. Many of these same horrendous policies are happening right here in Sarasota County at voucher-funded private schools.

There are 36 private schools in Sarasota that take Florida State-supported vouchers—a surprisingly large number when you consider that Sarasota County has only 39 traditional public schools (excluding charter schools). However, many of these schools are quite small and some of the schools have small numbers of students receiving vouchers so the overall numbers amount to 1673 students, which is about 3.8% of total student population in Sarasota County and is at a cost of about \$10 million.

Of the 36 voucher-funded schools, 55% of the schools are religious with the following breakdown: 13 are Christian schools; 5 are Catholic schools; 1 is a Jewish school and 1 is an Islamic school. Interestingly and not surprisingly, the highest performing private schools in Sarasota County, like Out of Door Academy (with a tuition of \$28k), do not accept school vouchers.

School voucher proponents argue that vouchers improve equity and provide choice for low-income families and children of color, but in Sarasota very few African American students, the most economically challenged group in the County, use vouchers to attend private schools. Over 70% of voucher recipients are white students while only 2% are African American (even though African American students comprise 7% of Sarasota District schools).

While there are many reputable private schools receiving voucher-funding, like Cardinal Mooney High School (still a strong argument can and should be made against their funding), there is a sizable grouping of schools in Sarasota County that demonstrate disturbing practices or preach definite ideologies or extreme religious beliefs. These include:

- The Classical Academy of Sarasota, which accepts school vouchers, is based on a model developed by Hillsdale College, a Michigan-based ultra-conservative religious college that is financially supported by US Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos and her family. The Sarasota Classical Academy, which is one of many Hillsdale College-shaped classical academies dotted throughout the US and Florida, teaches from a “Western canon” perspective emphasizing lecture-based learning and a “back-to-the-basics” approach. It rejects multi-culturalism, forces all students to study Latin and teaches the virtues of free enterprise.
- A number of Christian schools in Sarasota County accepting vouchers discriminate against LGBTQ students and family members. For example, the Venice Christian School received \$864,972 through State voucher programs in 2018-19 and educates students “in accordance with the truth of scriptures.” Its parent handbook (which is no longer available online) states that the school “retains the right to refuse enrollment to or to expel any student who...professes to be homosexual/ bisexual/transsexual (sic) or is a practicing homosexual/bisexual/transsexual (sic), as well as any student who condones, supports or otherwise promotes such practices.”
- The Calvary Chapel School in Sarasota, which last year received \$189,197 in voucher payments, has similar admission and expulsion policies as the Venice Christian School outlined above. Additionally, the school only admits and retains students who attend church and requires that “at least one parent” also attend church. The school states that it seeks “godly families committed to biblical standards, and students who demonstrate a high level of respect and obedience toward their parents.”

- All 13 of the Sarasota voucher-accepting Christian fundamentalist schools use Christian curriculum products developed by three major vendors: Abeka, BJU Press (Bob Jones University) and Accelerated Christian Education (ACE).
- ACE, the most widely used curriculum in Sarasota Christian fundamentalist schools, is particularly popular and is useful for schools that hire inexperienced staff. ACE is a self-paced, workbook-based curriculum that is available for all subjects K—12th grade. Each workbook is sequenced and self-explanatory, utilizing fill-in-the-blank and multiple-choice worksheets. When a student completes one workbook, the student advances to the next level workbook. The company recommends that students sit in separate cubicles with extensions so as to reduce distractions. The students process these workbooks in multiple subjects all day long. The workbooks provide a “bible-based curriculum” to promote a “God-centered environment of absolutes.” History textbooks minimize the effects of slavery and the science text books deny evolution.
- The Abeka Curriculum, used at Calvary Chapel School and Venice Christian School, is based on extreme Christian fundamentalist beliefs. The authors of the curriculum state that they based their curriculum on the belief that “God created the heavens and the earth in six literal days.” The authors state that they “reject the man-made theory of evolution occurring over millions of years.” And further state that “God created man and woman in His own image and instituted marriage between one biological man and one biological woman.”

But the most troubling finding is that of the Westcoast School for Human Development in downtown Sarasota. The Westcoast School, largely funded with Florida school vouchers, was founded by Dr. Henry Porter, a prominent Newtown resident, and former bishop of the Westcoast Center for Human Development. Dr. Porter was arrested on January 2 and charged with several counts of sexual battery with a child under 12. The Sarasota police reported that Porter has multiple allegations of sexual assault, some sources claiming upwards of 40 assaults, over a 30-year span with male children, some as young as 10 years old, who were students at the school. Most of the sexual assaults took place in the school's inner office while school was in session.

Porter remains in jail without bail. While Porter retired from his position at the church and school over three years ago, he still spent considerable time at the school. In a recent phone call to the school, it was learned that the school still receives vouchers from the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program and the Family Empowerment Scholarship program. None of the local media has linked Dr. Porter and his school to the fact that it has been largely funded through the Florida voucher programs for probably close to 20 years. Could multiple assaults over 20 years have happened in a regulated public school?

Schools like the Westcoast School or the Venice Christian School can operate under the radar because they lack regulation and accountability. Incidents like these do not seem to matter to the champions of privatization in the Florida State Legislature, to Governor DeSantis or to Secretary of Education Richard Corcoran. They turn a blind eye to discriminatory practices or harmful educational practices. Secretary Corcoran has said repeatedly, and in public, that he would like to see all public education “voucherized.”

One glitch has recently surfaced that may limit the expansion of vouchers funded through the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program—a program that has provided the bulk of the scholarship vouchers. Two young activist Florida House representatives, Reps. Anna Eskamani (D-Orlando) and Carlos Guillermo Smith (D-Orlando) have challenged the legislature to give LGBTQ students receiving vouchers guaranteed protections against discrimination. Their efforts have thus far failed in the legislature, but Eskamani and Smith have taken their case directly to the businesses that donate to the Tax Credit Scholarship program in exchange for tax credits. This is working and thus far seven large businesses, including Wells Fargo, have severed ties with the program costing the program millions of dollars.