

Savings accounts proposal would hurt Florida schools



Your Turn

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Guest columnist

Imagine an education system modeled after Amazon.com where parents choose educational programming for their children from competing vendors listed on a Florida Department of Education online marketplace. This is what Florida state Sen. Manny Diaz (R-Hialeah) has in mind with Senate Bill 48 – the education scholarship programs proposal that was introduced last week.

Diaz's bill consolidates five of the six scholarship voucher programs into two programs: one for students with disabilities and the other for regular education students from low- and middle-income families. It switches out school vouchers for education savings accounts and funds these accounts directly from the Florida treasury.

If this legislation passes, more than 220,000 of Florida's students – or 8% of all students in the state – will receive education savings accounts. The leaders of Step Up for Students, the nonprofit that administers Florida's scholarship programs, say that's merely a starting point.

How do education savings accounts work? The state Department of Education deposits a predetermined amount of funds into debit accounts administered by Step Up for Students for those eligible. A parent can draw from the account, purchasing pretty much any service or product loosely justified as educationally related – including part- or full-time tuition to a private school. An Amazon-like website marketplace – known as "My Scholar Shop" – already exists with thousands of vendors.

The legislation promoting education savings accounts is diversionary and dangerous.

It is diversionary because Florida public schools are in crisis; they have been turned completely upside down by the pandemic. Enrollment is down, valuable learning time has been lost, students are traumatized and district leaders have no idea what budgetary shortfalls may occur. Rather than focusing on school privatization schemes like education savings accounts, the Florida Legislature should find ways to support public schools by fully funding them.

Diaz and the other supporters of Senate Bill 48

steadfastly ignore real solutions to the many problems that have historically plagued public education in Florida. Schools and communities, for example, have struggled for decades to achieve racial equity – and to close the achievement gap. Proven programs like full-service community schools and dual language programs are either underfunded or not funded at all. Meanwhile, vouchers to private schools have reached \$1 billion.

Education saving accounts are dangerous because they have all the bad features of school vouchers along with other troublesome features. While vouchers fund only private schools, education savings accounts can fund so much more. While vouchers have few regulations, education savings accounts have even fewer.

In addition education savings accounts encourage homeschooling, learning pods, micro-schools and virtual schools; these are just some of the many options that parents can mix and match. The bottom line is that education savings accounts will create a "free-for-all" atmosphere with "anything goes" curriculum – and with no general accountability and little transparency.

An even bigger danger with education saving accounts is that their backers – billionaire school reformers like the Walton family, Charles Koch, Florida's own John Kirtley and others who are putting hundreds of millions of dollars into organizing campaigns – see this as a radical tool to restructure education.

On a universal scale education savings accounts would break education up into tiny, privatized pieces. That would be tragic – the beauty of the public school system, the cornerstone of American democracy, has been its rich diversity with students from all sorts of backgrounds, ethnicities and talents mixed together as a "great equalizer."

Supporters of public education in Florida have already begun to mobilize to defeat Senate Bill 48. There are lessons to be learned from similar battles in other states – and particularly in Arizona, which has demographics comparable to those in Florida.

In Arizona parents, teachers and community members defeated education savings account legislation similar to what's being proposed in Florida: they formed Save Our Schools Arizona and created a mass movement around a referendum campaign that repealed the legislation by a large margin.

This can happen in Florida, too. Let's get to work.

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