

Teacher union 'shock' about campaign spending is surreal

BY JOHN KIRTLEY
Guest columnist

The politics of school choice are particularly unforgiving these days, but one of the messages being sold in this year's Florida legislative session is amusingly hypocritical.

The backdrop is a bill to strengthen a scholarship that for the past 12 years has provided some economically disadvantaged Florida children access to private schools. Though the effort has been cast by opponents as a dramatic expansion, the bill headed for a House floor vote on Friday has been changed so it no longer contains either an increase in the statewide cap or a sales-tax credit — two of the most contentious parts. It's worth remembering that this scholarship is the only choice program with a statewide cap.

In politics, though, the size of the debate doesn't always conform to the size of the legislation. The Florida Education Association has launched an aggressive campaign to block it, including a requisite attempt to discredit the supporters. But what is especially entertaining is the FEA's feigned shock that scholarship advocates might invest in political campaigns involving Democrats.

The FEA is distributing a video from a 2011 school-choice conference in Berkeley, Calif., that features Doug Tuthill, who is president of the nonprofit that administers the tax-credit program and a former chapter president for FEA. The conference was put together by a group that includes many liberal academicians who appreciate the historical role teachers unions have played in providing financial support for Democrats. But they asked him how to break that grip because they are dismayed the money now comes with a prohibition on voting for private school choice.

Tuthill's answer was honest and direct: Invest in legislative races, just like the union does.

This is an unsurprising statement to anyone with even a passing acquaintance with modern politics, but FEA Vice President Joanne McCall was aghast: "This video reveals that it's all about the money."

Now I do not defend the way big money is impacting modern politics or the coarse campaigns that are often a byproduct, but to be lectured on the evils of campaign



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spending by the FEA is surreal. It is the FEA's primary political weapon. Since 2002, the FEA and its national affiliates have invested \$20.1 million in Florida campaigns, according to the Florida Division of Elections. Its money is so integral to Florida Democratic legislators that no one raises an eyebrow when all the party's House and Senate members meet, as they did on April 2, at FEA headquarters. The low-income parents for whom the school-choice movement fights don't have money for campaigns. I am honored to fight for them and to help their voices be heard.

Here's one way to measure the impact of the FEA's spending: Democrats admirably fight to increase money for Florida's pre-K program, even though it's the nation's largest voucher system — with 144,000 4-years-olds in private centers, many of them religious. Democrats also fight for Bright Futures scholarships, even though they help students of all incomes attend public and private universities — religious ones, too.

Yet Democrats this year oppose even a modest expansion for a scholarship that helps the poorest of K-12 students attend a private school. The difference: FEA represents employees in K-12 schools.

Across the country, the teacher unions' increasingly adamant opposition to choices not employing unionized teachers, including charter schools and online courses, is creating fissures in the Democratic Party. National organizations such as Democrats for Education Reform and the Black Alliance for Educational Options are accelerating in membership. Just last month, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo battled his state's teachers union on charter schools. Also in New York, a bill to create a private-school scholarship program modeled after Florida's recently passed the state Senate with all but three Democrats in favor.

The FEA is certainly entitled to advance an educational agenda that serves the needs of its members, but its public disgust over campaign spending is a bit much to swallow. Whether or not a scholarship bill helping low-income children passes this year, let's please drop the pretense that the union's money is not part of the political equation.

John Kirtley is chairman of Step Up For Students, a nonprofit that helps administer the Tax Credit Scholarship. He is also chairman of the Florida Federation For Children, a "527" political funding organization.

Note: In addition to passing the New York Senate with all but three Democrats in favor, the tax credit scholarship bill there has been co-sponsored in the state Assembly by a majority of Democrats and over 90 percent of the Black and Hispanic Caucuses.