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Scott rolls out education plan

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Pledging to cut taxes and increase school choice for parents, Republican Rick Scott rolled out his education plan Tuesday in what could presage a long fight with the state's teachers union.

"Parents ought to have a right to choose a school for their kids," said Scott. "Competition is good."

To accomplish his education plan, Scott wants to increase taxpayer-backed private school scholarships, charter schools, homeschooling and online education. At the same time, Scott wants to trim \$1.4 billion in property taxes for schools and cut up to \$700 million more in corporate income taxes - a main vehicle to fund a state educational voucher program.

Scott said he won't actually cut the schools budget overall, and will make up for the lost revenue by cutting other parts of the budget and trimming fat.

"There's a lot of money in government waste," he said, without providing an example.

Scott's 12-page education plan, unveiled at the North Broward Academy of Excellence in Fort Lauderdale, calls for more higher-education spending but says nothing about spending more on K-12 public schools - a threat to the Democratic-leaning teachers union, the Florida Education Association.

The union's preferred candidate, Democrat Alex Sink, dismissed Scott's plan as a gimmick because it lacked specifics.

"He can go out all day long and say he'll eliminate certain taxes and yet not tell all the people of Florida what he would cut as a result," Sink said. "I don't think that's right. I don't think it's honest. So he has a lot of explaining to do."

But Sink also has been vague on details. Her education plan would increase spending while eventually reducing state-set school property taxes - but she won't specifically say how she'll do that.

The union's lead lawyer, Ron Meyer, questioned how Scott could expand voucher programs, cut taxes and not take money from public schools. Meyer successfully argued a case earlier this decade that led to the dismantling of a Jeb Bush scholarship program.

A state appeals court declared the vouchers unconstitutional because they violated a state ban on mixing church and state. Ducking that issue, the Florida Supreme Court said the vouchers weakened the quality of the state's public schools.

Still, two other voucher programs remain: the McKay Scholarship program for disabled children and the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program for poor children. The latter is primarily funded with corporate tax credits as well as credits for taxes on insurance.

In return for providing the scholarship money, corporations receive dollar-for-dollar tax credits. The program sends more than 30,000 students to more than 1,000 private Florida schools, of which about 80 percent are religious.

Because he wants to eventually phase out corporate taxes, Scott's tax plan would remove a major source of money from the voucher program. But he said he would find a way to keep the program going by working with the Legislature.

If, however, Scott and the Legislature used general tax money to support the voucher program, Meyer said, it would "run into constitutional infirmity" and the union would strongly consider suing. "The devil's in the details, and we don't have them," he said.

If elected, Scott said he would expand educational choice programs. Sink has said she doesn't want to increase voucher programs for now.

The state's leading advocate for vouchers, venture capitalist John Kirtley, sounded a note of disappointment in Sink's position.

"This scholarship program is bipartisan, and I urge both candidates to publicly and strongly pledge to protect and grow it," Kirtley said in a written statement. "Mr. Scott did exactly that, and I'm confident he would consider the effect of any tax plan on these low-income children."

Kirtley's organization, Step up for Students, helps children obtain Florida Tax Credit Scholarships. It noted that state studies show the scholarships reduce overall state spending by at least \$40 million yearly because they help relieve overburdened public schools.

Another big difference between Scott and Sink: He would have signed failed legislation known as Senate Bill 6, which would have closely linked teacher raises to student test scores. Sink says she would have vetoed it.

She said she, too, supports merit pay for teachers. But where Scott said he wants to use test scores to determine merit pay, Sink said she wants to use other factors, such as the input of principals and even parents.

Sink accused Scott of being deceptive Tuesday and he accused her of "simply throwing more taxpayer dollars at an outdated system."

As he left the K-8 charter school Tuesday, Scott summed up his education plan this way to the students: "We want to make sure every student has the same opportunity you have here at this school."
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