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Education Connection:

Is Florida Ready for the Universal School Choice Bill?

*Joseline Vargas**

Educational inequities can affect someone's future; school choice is meant to bridge the gap between those that receive a better education and those unable to receive one due to financial hardships to ensure a better future for students. While in numerous occasions school choice is a student's saving grace from a failed system, regulations must be in place to ensure that the people that are being helped by the law are those who need it, not just want it. Florida, following the school choice movement, has introduced the Universal School Choice Bill, which has now been voted in and signed. However, its implementation has gathered criticism, the main one being the possibility of it resulting in diminished funding for public schools.

The Florida Senate Education Committee recently approved the school choice bill to modify K-12 education programs to provide financial support to families. This bill makes all students in the state of Florida eligible to receive state funds for private tuition and other educational cost in the form of vouchers. While the scholarships were originally capped at an income of around \$51,000 for a family of four, the Universal School Choice bill removes this cap and allows for any parent to request and receive a scholarship from the state as long as their child is a resident of the state and enrolled in a public school – grades K-12 – in said state. The bill is ultimately meant to provide options to parents to level the playing field. By providing assistance and flexibility, the bill offers parents the opportunity to send their children to private schools or public schools in better districts. For families living in communities with underfunded schools, being granted this assistance, their choice is normally clear – private school. While school choice is greatly beneficial in addressing socioeconomic inequities in school settings, Florida needs to follow other states' leads and set guidelines to address possible negative repercussions of the bill.

I.BACKGROUND

A. *What is school choice?*

School choice allows education funds to be allocated to the student to best fit their needs – whether for schools or services. Students can use these funds in public schools, private schools, charter schools, home school or any other learning environment of the families' choosing. Public schools receive funding per student, and school choice allows the funding that is allocated to each student to follow them to the school of their choice,

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in the location of their choice within the state. More and more states are choosing to implement and expand school choice in different ways. School choice comes from a movement to disallow ZIP codes and family income requirements to determine a student's future. Without school choice, parents are forced to send their children to public schools in their current neighborhood. Since public schools are usually funded by local property taxes, schools in poorer, more diversified, neighborhood are often underfunded and overcrowded, often limiting a student's potential and failing to meet their educational needs. These programs are meant to address each student's individual educational needs rather than sticking to its failing generalized education system. Parents can elect to send their children to a high-quality public school or a private school or use the funds for other educational needs – such as paying for school supplies, tutoring, or other services – depending on the legislation set in each state.

School choice can come in different forms depending on how the state chooses to implement it. Vouchers provide a portion of the educational funding allocated to each child to the parents to use for a school of their choice. Tax-credit scholarships allow the reduction of tax liability of individuals and business in exchange of helping a family fund their children's education. Individual tax credits and deductions help families pay educational expenses by making them itemize deductions. Education Savings Accounts take the full amount of the child's allocated funding to be put in an individual education account that parents can use toward their child's education. School choice can also differ from state to state in the goal of ultimately providing more educational opportunities.

B. School choice in different states

While open enrollment – a form of school choice – is available in all states, not all states offer scholarship and deduction programs for families. Around 31 states offer scholarship programs, there are even less that offer both scholarship and deduction programs or only deduction programs. However, more states appear to be looking into further expanding school choice.

Iowa and Utah have both passed laws that grant education savings accounts to every student in the state regardless of family income to choose an education plan that best meets their needs. Furthermore, Utah was the third state to enact legislation to create state-funded scholarship programs. The Utah Fits All Scholarship is meant to provide \$8,000 to students to use toward private school education and other education related expenses, as well as increasing annual teacher salaries. Utah set the regulations for this scholarship program, capping it at \$42 million and 5,000 participants.

With only 35% of Arkansas third graders reading at grade level, the state has sought to make changes to the education system. Arkansas seeks to pass a school choice bill after working with parents and other educational authorities to find ways to improve education. This legislation would also increase teachers' pay and work toward improving literacy rates. Ultimately, their goal being to ensure that students are getting the best education possible.

II. WHO IS BENEFITTING FROM SCHOOL CHOICE

A. *Benefits of School Choice and the new Florida Bill*

School choice is implemented differently in each state with a similar goal in mind, to allow marginalized children the ability to attend a school of their choosing through state funding. In places like Baltimore City, where only 7% of third through eighth graders tested proficient in math citywide, school choice is a necessity. For many students such as Walter Blanks, school choice can be lifechanging. Walter faced numerous challenges in the public school system, from daily bullying to teachers that were shocked he could even read a comic book completely. Through the Edchoice Scholarship Program, Blanks was able to attend a small private school and experience high-quality education.

School choice further benefits families who need access to special education for their children. Special education in public schools is often plagued by a lack of resources and teachers. This does not allow students to receive the level of attention and care they need to succeed. School choice gives parents of special needs children access to a greater network of resources to ensure their children are achieving their full potential.

The greatest benefit of school choice is that it is providing families the opportunity to individualize their children's education experience. School choice does not leave it to reluctant adults – often school boards or administrators, those in charge of making impactful educational decisions, to address the deficiency in the system and instead empowers parents to give their children better opportunities to ensure their success.

B. *Benefits and Potential Problems of the Florida 'Universal School Choice'*

The new Florida Bill expands school choice in Florida by expanding availability and providing more resources to families. Overall, this change is expected to cost around \$2.2 billion. By providing transportation to students, Florida has lowered some of the barriers present. Free transportation for these students will provide a wider range of educational choices and allow parents in lower-income communities to not worry about possibly working less in exchange of taking their child to a better school.

A major concern that accompanies school choice is the allocation of funds for public education. Many fear that school choice will divert funds from public schools into private schools as more parents choose to send their children to private schools. Low-income communities that are already affected by a lack of funds fear that this diversion of funds could prove to be fatal for the community. Since public schools are paid for the attendance of their students, the fear that fewer students will attend public school and therefore receive less funding is present. While the Florida bill is meant to enhance opportunities by making every student in Florida eligible for this funding, it does not mean that everyone will receive this assistance. If more students leave certain schools and school districts, those who were not chosen to receive this assistance will be left behind to deal with the ramifications of this vote. Schools could lose teachers, programs, and

may even close, putting a greater weight on parents who will now need to search for alternatives.

Furthermore, Florida needs to address how it would limit corruption of such an imperative measure. What is there to stop wealthy families from applying to these programs, taking away opportunities from those who really need the funding to access them? While the bill places priority on low-income families, it strips the income requirement from the Family Empowerment Scholarship, which provided K-12 students the option of attending participating private schools based on family income as well as providing a transportation scholarship for those who will attend a public school in a different district. By expanding the eligibility requirement, Florida has increased the competition for those who will be applying for these programs. However, it is imperative to acknowledge that it is opening these opportunities to children who may not have previously qualified due to their parents' income. Overall, Florida must be transparent in how this money is being used and what benefits it has achieved to ensure continued support.

C. What has and needs to be done?

The cap for low-income status in the United States is usually set where only the very poor can qualify, excluding families who also do not have the means to be able to access better education but do not qualify through income base means. While it is imperative to make these opportunities more widely available, an income requirement is necessary to ensure that the families that need this program benefit the most from it.

Florida needs to address potential issues that could arise from these changes to ensure support for such programs continue – these potential issues have been addressed by other states that have chosen to ride the wave of the school choice movement. Additionally, while low-income families will still get priority, there is nothing to ensure that every low-income family who applies will receive it. Not to mention that this bill has been voted into law without addressing the possible issues that could arise from the removal of enrollment caps, nor has it addressed what the funding for this expansion would look like.

School choice should not stop at providing families with money to access better education but should also work toward addressing the problems that are plaguing the public school system. Public schools receive funding per student attending the school, thus, the fear of further underfunding public schools needs to be addressed.

III. CONCLUSION

While school choice is vital in diminishing inequities, it is imperative that states can correctly implement these changes. Florida should take different considerations to ensure that the bill is doing what it intends to do without causing greater harm to those it is meant to help. The newest school choice bill opens eligibility for every student in the state of Florida. Where should Florida draw the line? School choice has become a

movement toward educational freedom, the acts of one state should not tarnish the potential of such laws. Furthermore, while the underfunding of public schools is a problem that needs to be addressed, there are other problems that also affect attendance in public schools. These problems cannot be solved solely with money but should instead look at the quality of education being provided and the involvement of educational authorities in children's lives and success, or lack thereof.

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