

Florida education commissioner advocates widespread privatization

Jean Bellevie and Matthew MacEgan
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Florida, which already leads the nation in the use of school vouchers and has long been the testing ground for privatization, has a new education commissioner bent on expanding edu-businesses in the state.

On January 8, 2019, Republican Richard Corcoran assumed office as Florida's new education commissioner. In that capacity, he will be governing public education and managing both funding and testing for local school boards. His appointment by newly-elected Republican Governor Ron DeSantis follows a national pattern in which enemies of public education are set loose to preside over public schools to destroy them and open up the "education market" for big business.

Corcoran is receiving a salary of \$276,000 annually, a fact which in itself explodes the lie that "there is no money" for education. The education commission will be paid a salary that is nearly six times the amount of an average Florida public-school teacher.

Meanwhile, as a result of the enormous amount of resources diverted to private education in the state, Florida has the lowest public school per-pupil funding in the nation, coupled with an abysmal 65 percent graduation rate.

Before his new appointment, Corcoran served as speaker of the Florida House of Representatives between 2016 and 2018, where he promoted the expansion of charter schools and the use of private school vouchers across the state. He was unanimously confirmed as education commissioner by the Florida Board of Education.

Corcoran stated last March that if Florida were to "voucherize" the entire school system, it would transform education for the better. "Let the market decide," he said, adding that the problem with public education is that parents don't pay schools directly.

School vouchers, or educational vouchers, are a "market driven" corporate policy which provides individuals with government-funded certificates for use in private or religious schools. The modern concept of vouchers was devised by arch-reactionary Milton Friedman in the 1950s, and its biggest champion today is current Education Secretary Betsy DeVos.

School voucher spending is already \$800 million per year in Florida tax revenues. Approximately 300,000 students were enrolled in charter schools during the 2017-18 school year, and about 140,000 students received vouchers, with over 1,700 private schools participating. Last year, Florida vouchers received three times more state funding than its closest competitor, Ohio.

These policies, designed to undermine and destroy public schools and create vast new profit opportunities, were pioneered under former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, a major national figure in the drive to privatize public education. Among Bush's initiatives was A-F grading for schools, designed to designate "failing schools" and shut them down permanently, now in use by 15 states. Bush also organized Chiefs for Change, an organization of state (and some city) school superintendents to promote school choice, digital learning, "value added" metrics and high-stakes testing. Chiefs for Change has wide overlap with the Broad Foundation's graduates and influence.

Privatizer-in-chief Education Secretary Betsy DeVos is a longtime Bush ally and has repeatedly pointed to Florida as a model for privatization across the nation. She was a board member of the Bush's Foundation for Excellence in Education which operated as a conduit for corporations to finance privatization.

In 2006, the Florida Supreme Court ruled that the statewide voucher system, the first in the nation, had

violated the state constitution. It ruled that the voucher program “diverts public dollars into separate private systems parallel to and in competition with the free public schools that are the sole means set out in the Constitution for the state to provide for the education of Florida’s children.” Legislators, however, found an end-run to subvert this ruling, setting up a system that gives corporations tax credits for their donations to nonprofits which then divvy up the vouchers, rebranded as “scholarships.”

While hundreds of millions of dollars are funneled into private institutions, public schools in Florida are severely underfunded. A teacher who works in the Daytona Beach area told the *World Socialist Web Site* that in Volusia County students have to bring in supplies for a supply bank at the school. While teachers have to supplement their classrooms with money from their own pockets, cities and counties are lavishing millions of tax dollars on nearby private ventures, such as the \$40 million spent on improving a NASCAR track and an associated shopping area in Daytona.

“There is always a shortage of money for books. Meanwhile, our state and local taxes were given to the billionaire France family of NASCAR to improve THEIR racetrack, and millions were given to Brown and Brown insurance company to build a nice new building,” the teacher reported. She emphasized, “Taxpayer dollars are given to wealthy private corporations while they steal from public schools. It seems illegal, but the public officials on the lower levels are just as corrupt as the federal officials. They are bought.”

The Florida legislature’s privatization efforts are increasingly targeting families with low incomes and disabled children. They couch this expansion with language intended to dupe the general public, telling parents that they “deserve more options” in the words of Richard Corcoran. Another of the new devious ploys is granting vouchers to students who have been “bullied,” an utterly vague designation which could open the floodgates to just about anyone who applies. For the first time, the legislature is also seeking to authorize sales tax payments for vouchers.

This is the latest expansion of what has become the country’s largest school voucher experiment, one that is threatening to go nationwide. In fact, DeVos’s Department of Education is replete with Florida

privatizers. Just to name a few: her chief of staff, Josh Venable, worked for Bush’s foundation and on his 2016 presidential campaign, Carlos G. Muñiz who was Bush’s deputy general counsel is now general counsel for the US Education Department, and Frank Brogan, now assistant secretary of elementary and secondary education, was Florida’s education commissioner and Bush’s lieutenant governor.

The most structural significant changes in opening up K-12 education for profit interests, however, occurred during the Obama administrations. The national Race to the Top grants, which provided states with large cash grants in exchange for various “accountability” programs, the adoption of the Common Core standards and the enormous increases in standardized tests all provided a wealth of business opportunities.

Opening up education to business has been a genuinely bipartisan affair. “It’s really the last honeypot for Wall Street,” noted In the Public Interest which tracks the growing privatization of public services.



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