



The Home Education Foundation

"Home Educators' Voice at the Capitol"

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K-20 Education Committee Speech

One of the most important issues to the private sector is our autonomy, independence and non-governmental status. I say this to you because there is a lot of discussion today about accountability. The Constitution requires the State to provide a free system of public education. However, private education is not the responsibility of the State under the Constitution.

With all the public school choices that have been created, the lines have become blurred between public and private in many peoples' mind. Choice began with the Development Research Schools. Then the Legislature created dual enrollment, schools-within-schools, open enrollment, magnets, juvenile justice and other programs. These were clearly public school alternatives to the traditional classroom. Since all children do not learn the same, the State began providing programs to meet the needs of different populations of students. The lines between public and private began to blur with the creation of charter schools, which are public schools freed from most of the laws pertaining to other public schools. In the last few years, the Legislature has created other choices for parents, such as The Florida Virtual School and the scholarship programs. These are wonderful choices for parents and students, but they are all public school choices. These programs create choices for low-income families and students with disabilities and those students trapped in low performing schools. These are programs all funded by public dollars and the New School Code in s. 1002.31 FS through s. 1002.39 FS defines all of these as public school choices.

Even though the Legislature has given parents subsidies in the form of scholarships to attend a private school, these scholarships are still public school choices. These programs give parents, who are responsible for their children's education and attendance, the opportunity to choose, from a variety of state-funded programs, the one that best meets the needs of their child.

However, private education and home education programs are not part of the public education system. The New School Code is very clear about private education and home education programs in s. 1001.21 having a separate office within the Dept. of Education that protects the autonomy, independence and non-governmental status of these educational options. Private schools have been providing choice to students and their parents since the beginning of time and long before public schools were created.

Private schools are accountable to the State for the safety and sanitation of the facilities and the health of the children. It would surprise you to see how many laws, rules, codes and regulations apply to private schools in Florida. I began compiling these last summer, for my own knowledge, and have been amazed at what I have found. Private schools are not only accountable to the State, but also to the parent for educational accountability. In this free enterprise system, parents who are paying for the education of their children will not keep their children in a private schools which does not meet the educational needs of their child. Parents have too many choices available to them **free** in the public system. They will not continue to support a school that does not meet their expectations. Private schools have to do a good job in the education of children or they do not stay in business. Accountability in a private school is to the parent whether the money they pay comes out of their own pocket or whether the state has provided the child a subsidy to attend that school. There is already a great deal of accountability in Florida on private schools. In order to preserve private schools as an educational option for some children, the state must be careful

not to further regulate these schools or the educational programs provided by these schools, or private education in Florida will cease to exist.

Home education parents as well as private school parents in this state have come to expect public school choices for designing their child's individual education. There are several publicly funded programs that really serve the needs of children in the private sector, especially home education. Dual enrollment and the Florida Virtual School are extremely important programs for home educated students. I would like to encourage the Legislature to fund these programs in a way that would not limit student participation.

Small public and private schools, as well as home educated students, need open access to courses in the Florida Virtual School. This excellent public school offers high quality education built on the Sunshine State Standards without the cost of buildings and transportation. Currently, there is such a high demand for courses in the Florida Virtual School that the available enrollments fill up within 24 hours and, for the last two semesters, there has been a long waiting list for courses. These courses fill gaps for students who need certain classes that may not be available to them at their public or private school. The Florida Virtual School provides students the opportunity to accelerate and maximize the time spent on their education. In addition to the high quality courses, students can take AP courses, which otherwise may not be available to them. Increasing the enrollment in Florida Virtual School either part-time or full-time and allowing students maximum access may be part of the solution to reducing class sizes.

Another very important program for home educated students is dual enrollment. Access to these courses should not be limited. Specific funding needs to be designated for dual enrollment so that students who meet the requirements and are academically ready can move more rapidly through the system. Expanding the dual enrollment opportunities could compress the time it takes a student to earn a high school diploma or an AA degree. Many home educated students who have been allowed access to this program have completed an AA degree at the same time they are completing their home education program, thus trimming two years off the educational time table. If this opportunity could be made available to public and private school students, dual enrollment could also help reduce class sizes.

Bright Futures Scholarships are certainly important to all of Florida's students, especially to those families who have made considerable sacrifices to send their children to private schools or home educate them. We would all agree that it is important to provide financial assistance to low income families, so that students from these families have the opportunity to obtain a college education. However, it is important that, in revising this program, students from middle to low-income families do not fall into a gap and fail to qualify for either a merit-based or needs-based scholarship. Equity for all students must be safeguarded.

Thank you for the opportunity to address these issues this morning.