

# The Boca Raton Tribune

## DeVos Push for Education “Choice” in Florida, Orlando, and Nation Helps Few, Hurts Most

By Robert Weiner and Ryan Powers

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For most parents across America, access to quality education for their children is a top priority. During a March 3 visit to Saint Andrew Catholic School in Orlando, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos reaffirmed her position that school choice is the solution to the fundamental problems of education in the United States.

“Parents deserve the right to choose the education that is best for their child,” she said. “Children should not be denied the right to attend a high-quality school that allows them to pursue the American Dream.”

Instead of focusing on policy solutions for children in subpar public schools, Secretary DeVos continues to insist that school choice is under attack.

In reality, the U.S. Government Accountability Office reported that “from school years 2010-11 through 2014-15, the number of students participating in these private school programs grew from approximately 70,000 to 147,000 students.” The funds provided for these students “increased substantially, from approximately \$400 million to \$859 million.”

With school choice on the rise, it seems that Secretary DeVos’ argument is misguided and a distraction from substantive education improvement. Her visit to Saint Andrew highlights how out of touch she is with legislation that she is responsible for overseeing.

In 2016, Governor Rick Scott pioneered House Bill 7029, a measure that implemented statewide school choice across Florida. In her press release, Secretary DeVos stated that school choice has a “transformative and positive impact” on student development.

Though she is correct about the effect of private schools like Saint Andrew Catholic School, she fails to acknowledge that House Bill 7029 has largely been used to help students move from one public school to another. This is primarily because many students still cannot afford private school, even with vouchers.

In other words, she seems to confuse the terms “school choice” and “private school.” In reality, school choice means being transferred from one public school to another, as shown in Florida. Public school is the only feasible option for most families, school choice or not.

Secretary DeVos cited Florida student Denisha Merriweather, a young woman "who was able to attend a private school when her public school did not meet her needs." She uses Merriweather to explain how school choice is valuable, but conveniently omits how Merriweather was one of few to benefit from the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program.

The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program only distributes scholarships for students who meet very specific criteria, catering primarily to extreme cases like Merriweather's. The primary recipients are students placed in foster care and students with a "household income level that does not exceed 260 percent of the federal poverty level."

To put this in perspective, a regular family of four with a household income of \$65,000 makes too much money to be eligible for the program. For the average family in Florida, this program serves virtually no benefit. Even if parents are able to "choose" this school for their child, how will they "choose" to pay for it?

School choice is great for the small percentage who have the financial means to afford a top-notch education. For everyone else, school choice poses more problems than it is worth.

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