

BTU *Broward Teachers Union*

A Union of Education, Technical Support, Charter School and Education Support Professionals

BTU EDITOR'S NOTE: The BTU is the proud representatives and organizers of the City of Pembroke Pines Charter Schools, which is the nation's premiere not for profit municipal charter school system.

THE MIAMI HERALD | EDITORIAL

Robbing public schools

OUR OPINION: Drop charter school construction funding, focus on repairing dilapidated traditional schools

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As roofs sag in old school buildings, air conditioners break, electric panels blow and mold grows in classrooms where students are expected to learn, the maintenance costs keep adding up in this unwinnable game of catch-up for Florida public school districts facing billions of dollars in needed repairs.

So what does the Florida Legislature propose to do about it?

Nothing substantial. Forget about alleviating this mounting public need or fixing an antiquated funding mechanism that's shortchanging public schools. Yet public education is the state's "paramount duty," as voters made clear when they passed a constitutional amendment in 1998 seeking "adequate" funding for education.

A long, drawn-out recession hasn't helped, but neither have legislators nor Gov. Rick Scott come up with a plan to ensure adequate funding. Instead, the House and Senate are looking to free up \$55 million in construction dollars for charter schools operated by private companies, while traditional public school kids are treated like second-class citizens.

Tallahassee once again has passed the buck to local school districts. Rep. Marti Coley, R-Marianna, who chairs the House PreK-12 Education Appropriations subcommittee, argues that traditional public schools can always raise property taxes, while charter schools aren't allowed to do that.

Raising the property tax is a dead end in this economy with the housing market reeling from foreclosures. Large urban school districts, like Miami-Dade and Broward districts, have virtually every construction penny dedicated to paying off debt for past construction projects built when growth to the suburbs in the 1980s and 1990s dictated where to build new schools. During that time, many older schools throughout Florida were neglected.

Miami-Dade plans to spend \$300 million for facilities next year — all going to pay off construction bonds. Meanwhile, Miami-Dade schools need \$1.7 billion in repairs and maintenance while Broward needs \$1.8 billion to fix its schools.

Charter schools, for their part, were sold to Floridians as a way to inject competition into a once stagnant public school system without raising costs.

They were supposed to help public schools improve and give parents choices — not steal limited resources from those struggling public schools.

Charters started as nonprofit endeavors mostly to help inner-city students succeed. They have evolved into money-making suburban enterprises with for-profit management companies lobbying their way up the Tallahassee food chain to keep expanding — even at the expense of public schools that are making great gains in student learning. Talk about bait and switch.

In the past decade, as charters expanded, the funding formula for construction of public schools and universities fell short because the sources of that tax revenue became outdated. The state's PECO (Public Education Capital Outlay) funds come from taxes on landline telephones, cable and electricity. But with efficiency improvements helping Floridians cut down on their electricity costs, and consumers dropping their landlines and cable for wireless technology that can deliver calls and TV shows, PECO funds are drying up.

Instead of punishing school districts doing a yeoman's job at traditional schools in some of the state's poorest communities, GOP legislators should be focusing on how to reward them. Start by dropping charter funding and finding others sources of revenue for school construction. Lose the bait-and-switch.

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