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Guest: Bob Sanchez (**BS**), director of public policy, The James Madison Institute

Guest: Mark Pudlow (**MP**), spokesperson, Florida Education Association

Guest: John Winn (**JW**), commissioner, Florida Department of Education

ZS: Welcome back, you're listening to "Perspectives" on 88.9 FM, I'm Zach Seidenberg. The debate over vouchers and school choice has been ongoing in the state for years. Since his election in 1998, Gov. Jeb Bush has touted school vouchers as an essential component to improving Florida's education system. And while some argue that state subsidies allow parents to choose the educational setting that best meets their child's needs, others are concerned that such programs can hurt the public schools and blur the lines between church and state. Today we'll hear from both voucher supporters and opponents, and we'll take your calls. First I want to welcome Bob Sanchez to the program. Sanchez is the public policy director with the James Madison Institute in Tallahassee. Good morning.

BS: Good morning.

ZS: Also with us is Mark Pudlow, communications director for the Florida Education Association, representing the state's largest union of teachers. Good morning Mark.

MP: Good morning Zach. You gave me a little title promotion there.

ZS: A little upgrade?

ZS + MP: "Spokesman"

ZS: Right. For the FEA. I apologize for that. And I want to welcome everyone in the listening audience, if you have comments or questions for today's guests about vouchers or school choice give us a call, or send your emails to perspectives@wfsu.org. And if you're nearby a computer today I urge you to take part in today's online poll on school vouchers. Visit our website wfsu.org and click on "Perspectives" and we'll talk more about the poll results later on in today's program.

ZS: First, why don't we discuss some of the history behind the voucher debate. Why has this become such a hot-button issue here in Florida and frankly across the nation I guess in recent years? Mark you want to take that first?

MP: Alright. Well it's become a hot-button issue because I think the political leadership in the state has decided that folks need more options than just the public schools. They talk constantly about failing public schools, and I think the failure may be in the state's reaction to public schools and the support that they give to public schools. This is a debate that's been kind of coming about ever since the governor was elected in '98.

ZS: Bob?

BS: I think actually some of Florida's public schools, certainly not all of them, but some of them had been failing their students for many years, and the problem, there was a great deal of complacency because most often the victims of the public schools' failures were people who were less able to express their frustration or concern. In fact, Floridians have had school choice for years, but only wealthy people could afford it. What occurred, and

this goes back prior to the current governor, Florida instituted measures to assess how students are progressing. It evolved into the FCAT, Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. And based on those test results, it was discovered that some schools were not doing a very good job with a lot of their students. The question that followed was: "well, what do you do if kids are trapped in schools that consistently are not performing well?". And the Opportunity Scholarships program, or vouchers, was created to provide an out for those kids who were in schools that failed two years out of four on the FCAT results, and were graded "F".

ZS: I want to bring somebody else now into this program. With us by phone is Florida's Education Commissioner John Winn, who's joining us from Orlando Airport about to leave, so he won't be with us all morning, but as for these voucher programs, obviously DOE and the state are charged with implementing them. When we're talking about vouchers, commissioner, why don't you tell us the three main programs that we're talking about here in the state of Florida?

JW: Alright, thank you, thank you Zach. We do believe that it's an equity issue that vouchers provides, not only greater equity for students, particularly our most struggling, students who are largely economically disadvantaged, overrepresentation of minority students, and in schools where these students have not been progressed, for decades actually, which was only really brought to light in a very clear and understandable way to the public was through the school grading program, and we've seen absolutely tremendous increase in student achievement through that accountability system, and through, frankly, the diligence and focus that teachers, administrators, and parents have made across the state. So, we believe that everybody's pulled together, it started with good, clear information and the realization that something dramatic needed to be done. The issue of vouchers or choice in Florida, there are three major programs. There's the Opportunity Scholarship program, as Bob described, for students who are zoned into a school that is rated "Double F", rated "F" for two years out of four. This was purely an equity issue to give parents, this is not to move children out of these schools, but to give parents a choice, and the overwhelming majority of parents wanted their child to continue to participate in their home schools. So, really, we're only having 5-7% of our parents making a choice to move their students because they feel like they could get a better education somewhere else. The second one is called the McKay Scholarship program, which is much, much larger than the Opportunity Scholarship program, the Opportunity Scholarship program is only about 700 students statewide. The McKay Scholarship program is for, essentially for parents, who are parents of students with special needs, who do not feel like their special needs are being properly dealt with at the public school. And so they may receive a voucher to attend another public school in the school district, or a private school that they feel can provide more effective services to their student with special needs. And the third program is a tax-credit scholarship program, where businesses are allowed to get a tax credit for providing scholarships or vouchers to low-income parents, essentially to choose another school if they want to, regardless of what public school their child is attending. And this is basically based on the premise that, you know, essentially Florida's middle, and upper-middle, and upper class has the opportunity to pick where they have their homes, they have an opportunity to send their kids to private schools, and this opportunity ought to be afforded to parents in all economic levels. And so, the corporate tax scholarship program is not money that goes

through the state coffers, but it is a tax credit for businesses that wish to contribute to these funds. So we think that all three programs add choices to parents who believe they can get a better education for their children or have special needs addressed in a better way. It basically empowers parents to make choices in education, much like they make choices in healthcare, and all other aspects of their children's lives. So we feel like its not only had a positive affect on the schools, there was a study done by Harvard that basically said the schools that were eligible for school vouchers had much more dramatic student improvement than schools that weren't eligible for Opportunity Scholarships. We have a court case Zach, coming up as you know, in terms of oral arguments, next week. And before I have to catch my plane I'd just like, if you could give me another minute, I'd just like to make a comment on that if you would.

ZS: Okay, quickly, please.

JW: We believe that if the Supreme Court follows its precedent, they'll rule the Opportunity Scholarship program constitutional, because it's a religious neutral program, it's offered to parents, and the Supreme Court hasn't struck down any religiously neutral program that provides opportunities for scholarships to parents even though a parent may choose to take that scholarship to a religious school, whether it be a college or a university or a K-12 school. So, we believe it's constitutional, we believe it's highly equitable, and we hope the Court will follow it's past precedent on that, and not put Florida in the situation where we're discriminating against schools that have a religious background, because we think such a ruling might be far-reaching in terms of healthcare, religious-affiliated hospitals, colleges, and universities. So, nobody wants to entangle government and religion, and we believe that this program is religiously-neutral, and simply offers a choice to parents to exercise a choice for a better education for their children.

ZS: Alright commissioner, well thank you for joining us, and hope you have a safe flight. I want to let Mark Pudlow jump in here, I think the commissioner crammed a lot of information and various points into his few minutes, but I'd like to get you to respond to some of them.

MP: Well, to talk about the case that's going to be heard before the Supreme Court next week, we have some serious differences in how we interpret what's going to be talked about before the Supreme Court. I think that there's a little bit of a difference between what the commissioner said, I think that the problem is that many of these schools have a religious mission, and that they are trying to, they make up a majority of the schools in which vouchers are being used, and that there's young and impressionable minds that are there, and the state constitution is pretty clear about giving money to religious institutions for the support of their religious mission, and with a lot of these schools, particularly elementary schools, it's very clearly part of their mission as a religious aspect to it.

ZS: Yes, supporters of vouchers I know, in some of the arguments I've read through various materials, and I think the commissioner might have brought it up as well, using schools and comparing them to religious hospitals, or other events. But in those institutions, there's no teaching of religion, they just might be religiously affiliated, is that a fair comparison to make?

MP: Well, I mean yeah, you can use public funds for example, a fire department will put out a fire at a church, but it's not using public funds to support the mission of the church. And, in a lot of cases, that's what these schools do.

BS: However, actually, recipients of the Bright Futures college scholarship program, which is funded by public money, are able to select a number of religious institutions whose core mission is indeed religious. So a broader question is, whether an adverse decision in the Opportunity Scholarship challenge, would also bring into question the Bright Futures scholarship, the use of Pre-K funds to attend church-affiliated, pre-kindergartens-

ZS: We'll talk more about that later.

BS: And the McKay scholarships, there are 14,000 children with special needs, some of whom do attend religiously-affiliated schools that meet their special needs. There are only 719 currently opportunity scholarship recipients. And there are about 10,000 kids in the corporate tax scholarship program, so a number of these programs could be in jeopardy, but the question revolves around what the so-called Blaine Amendment, in the Florida Constitution, and a number of other constitutions says-

ZS: Sure.

BS: It says "No revenue of the state shall ever be taken from the public treasury directly or indirectly, in aid of any church sect or religious denomination, or in aid of a sectarian institution. My question is, "what constitutes aid?" In my view, if I walk past the Salvation Army kettle and put a twenty dollar bill in, that's aid to that organization. If I ask Sister Sarah standing at the kettle if she has change for a twenty, and I give her twenty and she gives me two tens, is that aid or is that just equal exchange of services? In other words, the state when it provides vouchers, that are used for the schools, the schools are providing something of equal or greater value in return for, so in the sense they are not being subsidized or aided.

ZS: Mark, what are your thoughts? I want to talk, we'll get back to the Blaine Amendment and talk more about that later, but quickly before the break, can I get a response?

MP: Well, I wanted to talk a little bit about the Bright Futures, and the U.S. Supreme Court has made a distinction between primary schools and universities, and it was in a 1971 case, and I'd just like to read something that they said there, and they said: "There are generally significant differences between the religious aspects of church-related institutions and parochial, elementary, and secondary schools. College students are less impressionable and less susceptible to religious indoctrination." And I think that when you look at the mission statement of some of the religious schools, you'll see that they very clearly talk about students have to attend religious institutions, they have to attend religious services, and they're going to get indoctrinated to the particular religion, so that's a concern as well.

ZS: Okay, and I'll let Bob respond, but we do have to take a quick break, but first I want to give out the numbers they are 414-1234 and 1-800-926-8809. And if you're nearby a computer you can take part in our online poll today on vouchers. Visit our website wfsu.org and click on "Perspectives". We'll be right back.

ZS: Welcome back, you're listening to "Perspectives", on 88.9 FM, I'm Zach Seidenberg. Next week the Florida Supreme Court, and possibly begin to decide the fate of school vouchers in the state. Today we're discussing the issue with Mark Pudlow, the communications director for the Florida Education Association, and Bob Sanchez, the public policy director with the James Madison Institute, and I want to apologize, "spokesman", for the Florida Education Association, I apologize. If you care to take part

in our online poll today on vouchers, visit our website at wfsu.org and click on “Perspectives”, and we’ll talk more about those poll results in just a few minutes. If you have comments or questions for today’s guests, give us a call, the numbers are: 414-1234 and 1-800-926-8809 or send your emails to perspectives@wfsu.org. And Bob, before the break, I’m sorry we cut you off, but please, a response?

BS: No, I was just going to respond to, as we went to break, as we went to break, my friend from the teacher’s union was making a point of mentioning a 1971 U.S. Supreme Court decision, holding that the use of public funds to support college students was different from that for K-12. But subsequently, and very recently in fact, the U.S. Supreme Court...that it does not violate the U.S. Constitution to use public funds to send children in K-12 schools, this was in the Cleveland, Ohio voucher case, to those schools. So, a much more recent ruling says, “that’s okay, too”, at least by the U.S. Constitution, so the question comes back to, “what does the Blaine Amendment in the state constitution mean, and should it penalize schools for being religious? Is this a religiously neutral point-of-view, and are schools being aided if you give them money to provide a service?”

ZS: And I want to talk more in just a couple of minutes about the Blaine Amendment, but a question I’m assuming both of you have differing answers on. Depending on what happens in the Supreme Court next week, or whenever they reach their decision, are the state’s voucher programs, all of them, in jeopardy based on that ruling? Bob, why don’t we start with you?

BS: Well it may depend on how narrowly or broadly the Supreme Court draws, makes its decision, as often is the case.

ZS: Mark?

MP: I’d agree that the Supreme Court can make their decision based on a couple of different things, but what’s up for discussion at the oral arguments on Tuesday is the Opportunity Scholarships, and that’s what they’re looking at right now, and of course it may have broader implications, but that’s the narrow look at what we’re doing, at what they’re going to be discussing on Tuesday right now.

ZS: Alright, I want to go the phones now, we have Rick on the line in Tallahassee, Rick, good morning.

Rick: Good morning. Can you hear me?

ZS: Yes, go ahead, you’re on the air Rick.

Rick: Okay thank you. The whole issue of vouchers and public funding in support of private and religious schools I think is one that is really hot in the public debate today. And the thing that frustrates me the most, is the, what I perceive to be the sophistry of people like the gentleman from the James Madison Institute, where they propose all of these rationalizations for their programs, but they really do not come right out and say what their agenda is. Now, this is my opinion, but it is my opinion based on watching these folks for quite some time, that their agenda is to weaken what they call the “government schools”, to the point that there really is no universal system of public education for all of the society. And that is, what is behind all of these voucher schemes. And I do have respect for people that just up front say “Look, we don’t think government ought to be running schools.” And I think that they believe that, but they have learned that that is a point of view that will not be embraced by the general body politic, and so they come up with all of these absurd analogies, like getting change from Sister Sarah,

the fact is that private schools, whether they be religious or not, are selling a service, and in order for them to stay in business, they have to get money, and the ideologues of the right are determined that they're going to get as much money as they can, public money, into the coffers of religious and private schools, it's that simple.

ZS: Alright, let's, I think we get Rick's point, why don't we get a response from Bob here?

BS: Well, I think the best response to that, well first of all that's an old trick, to ascribe bad motives to people you disagree with. But I think the motive of the governor and other supporters of school accountability, FCAT, and vouchers as a way out for people in bad schools, the long-range goal is to improve the public schools. And a recent study by two researchers at Harvard University indicates that it is working, Florida's two-step combination of accountability, holding schools grading the schools, and providing an out, that in turn also provides a stigma to schools that may be graded "F" and provides a motivation to improve. This study was recently published this spring, it's titled "The Efficacy of Choice Threats within School Accountability Systems: Results from Legislatively Induced Experiments", and it's by Martin West and Paul Peterson of Harvard, hardly a center of right-wing ideologues.

ZS: Mark?

MP: Well, in fairness, Peterson is a well-known voucher advocate, and has been doing pro-voucher material for a long time, so his shop is in fact a pro-voucher thing and you won't see anything that isn't pro-voucher that comes out of it, and as far as the money is concerned, we do know that Wall Street, even back into the 90's, was looking at and holding seminars and talking with folks about the opportunity that existed within education, and they said "well, we can do to the education business what we've done to healthcare", and so I think that there is definitely an interest in getting a hold of the money that is spent on public schools, so.

ZS: When we talk about school choice though, I mean, can't parents, no matter where they live, can't you send your kid to school now currently wherever you want your kid to go to school?

BS: Not in most school districts in Florida.

ZS: I mean if, I'm saying if you're willing to pay, can't you send your kid to school wherever you want?

BS: Well, if you're willing and able to pay is the question, you know, and unfortunately many of the schools that have received failing grades are in areas, low-income areas, where the people, whether because of transportation problems or other problems, cannot effectively exercise a choice, even if they were allowed to make it. And in point of fact also, one of the most contentious issues that comes before school boards is attendance zones, as you know. They, in an effort to, assign students to particular schools, they effectively remove the element of choice for most parents.

ZS: But can you have, I guess a larger question is, can you have school choice without the vouchers? Are the two tied together, can you, can a parent, what ties school choice and vouchers together, could you have one without the other?

BS: We've had school choice for years for rich people, and including the limousine liberals in Congress and the legislature who send their children to private schools but deny that opportunity to poor people. And this is an effort to provide school choice in a realistic affordable way to people of low-income.

ZS: Okay, Mark?

MP: Well I think, yes, you can have school choice, and I think that there is chances for opening up public schools a little bit more widely to everybody, but FEA supports that a parent's right to send their child wherever they want to, but opposes the use of public funds to do so. And basically, when you start setting up this parallel school system, you end up draining money from the public schools which are desperately in need of it.

ZS: For people who are against vouchers, I guess more on your side of it Mark, is it the religion issue, or is it simply the money going to private institutions and not the home district school of where that child, I guess, resides? If the religion aspect were taken out of it, and vouchers were okay for private schools and sending you kid to a different public school, would that be okay?

MP: The problem of sending state dollars outside the school system is a problem with us, its more the fact that, rather than spending the money and taking a look at seeing what we can do to improve our public schools, we kind of give up on them, we decide that we're going to allow people to go to private schools, whether they're religious or not, and this drains money from the public schools, at a time when its desperately needed.

BS: I disagree. I think we've found what improves public schools, and that is competition, and choice, and accountability, holding them accountable, but right now if a family moves from Leon County to Wakulla County, the FTE, the money, follows the child. And, that doesn't, nobody seems to get excited about that in Leon County, because there are plenty more kids coming in and so forth, so the school system still has plenty to do.

ZS: Mark?

MP: What improves schools is smaller class size, what improves schools is recruiting and retaining the best teachers that you possibly can, those are the elements that improve schools, not competition, and unfortunately, those things cost money, and that's what's at the root of the entire voucher issue.

ZS: Alright, I want to go back to the phones now, we have Sam on the line in Gadsden County. Sam, good morning.

Sam: Thank you, good morning. I'm a public school retiree, and public schools have been sort of the backbone of our entire county from the beginning, and I'm wondering, our teachers today are trained and prepared to go into classrooms through going to college and universities and getting prepared to get certified. Now, I'm wondering about the training and quality of the teachers and their rate of pay, for instance, in the private and the parochial schools. Have you given that some thought?

MP: Well, the problem there is, that teachers that are in private schools, aren't in many cases, aren't subject to the same kind of requirements and certification requirements that public school teachers are. Obviously the best of the private schools will have good teachers, but we're not making a determination on the quality when we send folks out on vouchers.

BS: Well basically, the teachers unions' one concern is, most of the teachers in the private schools, are not paying union dues, so that the union leaders can plunder them. Secondly, there is another issue as to whether or not the private schools should be subjected to the same bureaucratic red tape as the public schools.

ZS: Meaning?

BS: Meaning, basically the union thinks that parents are too dumb to choose a school for their children, to evaluate the quality of the education provided, they may be able to pick out a pediatrician, they may be able to pick out a youth league for sports, but they can't pick out a school without the guidance of the government.

ZS: Well, one question I have, I mean, everyone more or less, I mean, depending on, maybe the exact dwelling you live in, but don't people more or less choose where they want to live? And isn't that based on where your child goes to school, where you live?

BS: Where your child goes to school is often based upon where you live, that's true.

ZS: But people make that choice-I'm just trying to understand, don't people choose where they want to live, so they're choosing the schools that they're sending their children to.

BS: They choose within what they can afford, within the options they can afford. And this brings up another point: the greatest way people accumulate wealth in our society is the equity in the homes. And if you look at the real estate ads in any newspaper you'll find that they frequently mention the school district that they're in. In Tallahassee they'll mention they go to Chiles or Leon High School. The same house, same square footage, same bricks, same nice yard, in some sections of Tallahassee will be worth twice as much as those in others and have much greater resale value and therefore the owners will be accumulating more wealth because of the fact that they're in excellent public schools. And most of the schools in Leon County, most of the public schools, are good and are rated very highly under FCAT. But this does deny a lot of low-income and minority families the same opportunity to build equity because they're trapped in areas that have lousy schools.

ZS: Mark, any response?

MP: If there are, if there are schools that are not performing as well as the best public schools, I think that the state of Florida should do everything it can to improve those schools, rather than giving an out and abrogating the responsibility-you know, we haven't talked about the accountability question about vouchers yet, and in fact public schools are subjected to a rigorous accountability based on a single FCAT test. The test is punitive, it is a difficult test that, that the schools concentrate on, and we've seen the test schools rise, everybody's real happy about that, the teachers of the state of Florida and the students of the state of Florida worked hard to improve on the accountability, when in fact somebody takes a voucher and goes to a private school, the accountability goes. Taxpayer money, same dollars that are going to the public schools, but we require them to be accountable in the public schools, not at all in the private schools.

ZS: I'll get a quick response from Bob and then I want to give out the numbers once again.

BS: Different form of accountability: parents evaluate how their kids are doing, and how the school is doing.

ZS: Back to the poor-performing school, and then I'll give out the numbers again. If a school is a "double-F" failing school, is every child in that school eligible for a vouchers.

BS: Yes.

ZS: So, theoretically, the school could be shut down then if every child decided to leave that public school, is that right?

BS: But they don't.

ZS: Alright but, what my question I guess then is, based upon socioeconomic concerns, or maybe the overall concern by the parent of the child's education, won't some children, even with the voucher, still get left behind then in that failing school, what then happens to that school to improve it for the kids that remain there, I guess?

BS: It tries to get off the "F-list". And makes heroic efforts to improve, sometimes by bringing in different administrators, different teachers or department heads, providing extra help, and so that is what has caused large numbers of schools that initially were rated "F" to improve a couple of grade levels or more.

ZS: Mark?

MP: Well the- also another problem is that there is not enough capacity for voucher students, so I mean there's only a limited number of schools, private schools that take vouchers, and there's-in fact everybody doesn't have the opportunity, it is a little bit of a lottery going there. Some folks can get out, others can't, and the problems of the "F" schools are compounded, especially if you have students leaving, because when the students leave the money leaves with them, and it becomes harder to improve. In fact what we ought to be doing is trying to figure out the best way to get the best teachers in there, to lower the class size, and to see that we can get more resources so that we can improve these schools, they can be as good as the best public schools.

BS: Well if vouchers were so lucrative that they amount to quote "aid", then private schools would be clamoring to get more voucher students. But in fact, the services that the private schools are providing are worth more than what the state pays for them. But the student the schools often take in out of the fidelity to their mission of educating students, they often take in voucher students, even though it's below what the tuition-paying students are paying.

ZS: Alright I want to pause here and give out the numbers again, we do have to take another quick break, 414-1234 and 1-800-926-8809 or you can send emails to perspectives@wfsu.org. We'll be right back.

ZS: Welcome back, you're listening to "Perspectives" on 88.9 FM, I'm Zach Seidenberg. Next week the Florida Supreme Court will hear arguments and possibly begin to decide the fate of school vouchers in the state of Florida. Today we're discussing the issue with Mark Pudlow, spokesman for the Florida Education Association, and Bob Sanchez, public policy director with the James Madison Institute here in Tallahassee. If you care to take part in our online poll on vouchers today, visit our website wfsu.org and click on "Perspectives." Or if you have comments or questions for today's guests give us a call, the numbers are 414-1234 and 1-800-926-8809, and I want to go back to the phones now, we have Kim on the line in Tallahassee, Kim, good morning.

Kim: Good morning.

ZS: Go ahead, you're on the air Kim.

Kim: Hi, I just wanted to say that my son is a recipient of the McKay Scholarship program. He's been going to a private school in Tallahassee for the last four years, he's got quite a few learning disabilities, and when he was just about ready to go to high school, he was basically told in our IEP meetings that he was probably only going to get a special diploma. And we decided to put him in Woodland Hall Academy. And he will be graduating next week, and if it wasn't for the McKay Scholarship program, he would not be graduating from high school. And I just think it's a great program, and I disagree with, you know, saying that the money's going to be lost, when it goes with the student,

because I feel that it would be the same as a child leaving the district and going to another district. I just don't see where anyone can say there's anything wrong with this program, because he would not be graduating from high school, he was not given the services he needed to graduate in the public school system, and I think this program is a godsend.

Thank you.

ZS: Thanks for your call Kimberly. And something like that, the McKay Scholarship program we talked a little bit about earlier, but, is that program in jeopardy of losing funding?

BS: Well, as Mark pointed out, the case before the Court focuses on Opportunity Scholarships right now, so it may depend on how broadly the ruling is made. However, some of the, the fact is, that some of the private schools that children with special needs attend are affiliated with a religious organization. And so a future challenge, I suppose, focusing on the McKay Scholarships, could bring that program into jeopardy. And I am aware of two children who attend the school that the caller's son attended, and I think it does wonderful work, and it would be very unfortunate if the McKay Scholarship-I happened to speak to a reporter for a liberal newspaper in the capital press corps, who is a very-who despises everything that Gov. Bush is for, including Opportunity Scholarships, but whose own son had special needs and is very supportive of the McKay Scholarships, so there is a case of, you know, depends on what hits close to home.

ZS: And I guess, heading into next week's Supreme Court decision, earlier in the show Bob you talked about some other states, you had mentioned Ohio, how is this debate playing out in other states across the nation right now, is it?

BS: Well many states have Blaine Amendments in their constitution, those were adopted in a period of anti-Catholic fervor, back in the 1880's and 90's when large numbers of Catholic immigrants were arriving in the United States, and as the states modernized their constitutions, that was kept, as it was in Florida's constitution. But again, so there are a lot of states watching what happens in Florida because they have similar provisions in their state constitutions, and it could be that although it doesn't violate the U.S. Constitution, it might violate the constitution of a particular state. Florida's constitution, for example, has a much broader privacy provision than does the U.S. Constitution. So something that could be okay under the U.S. Constitution and in another state might not be okay in Florida, so this is an important decision.

ZS: Well given a read of the Blaine Amendment, you described what it was a little bit earlier, I mean, on a simple read does that statement make vouchers unconstitutional?

BS: Well to paraphrase President Clinton, who wondered what the meaning of "is" is, this may turn on what the meaning of "aid" is, and also on the question of whether penalizing a school because of its affiliation with a church doesn't violate the principle of being neutral with respect to religion. Inasmuch as any church or religious organization would be-is free to found a school, if it wishes, and to participate in the program, so the program is religiously neutral.

ZS: So, Bob, do you see Blaine Amendments then as being discriminatory?

BS: I think a lot of people believe they are, and I would tend to agree.

ZS: Alright, what are your thoughts Mark?

MP: Well I think that, the wording of the constitution about aid to religious institutions is solid. I don't-as far as the Blaine Amendment is concerned, I understand that there were people who were anti-Catholic who supported them, I'm not sure that their genesis was

entirely anti-Catholic at the time, the Catholic Church was trying to get into public schools, and so it was a legitimate reaction to the separation of church and state, now. That some people that didn't like Catholics supported them doesn't necessarily mean that they're steeped in anti-religion.

ZS: Right. Quickly Bob then we'll go back to the phones.

BS: In case anyone is curious, the Blaine Amendment, the "Blaine" in Blaine Amendment, is for James G. Blaine, who was a senator from Maine and was a nominee for president who ran on the slogan accusing his opponents of being the party of "rum, Romanism, and rebellion."

ZS: Alright, let's go back to the phones, we have Paul on the line in Valdosta, Georgia. Paul, good morning.

Paul: I'm firmly convinced that these vouchers are designed to avoid funding schools properly to poor people. And a case in point is Cleveland, Ohio, they featured a story on Cleveland, Ohio vouchers giving \$1,800 a year more per student than the cost of tuition at a Catholic school, and a lady from Venezuela, who brought her daughter up there to attend school at taxpayers' expense in the 8th grade. Now it seems to me like Social Security, there's an effort to do away with it, Chuck Nor-Grover Norquist was absolutely clear on that. And this bunch is anti-"the people", particularly poor, working people, and working poor.

BS: So we should leave poor, working peoples' children stuck in terrible schools, so they never learn to read at grade level, they never learn math, they never learn to write, is that what you're saying?

Paul: That is not a fault of the school, it's a fault of management, and the school system should not be penalized for not having the proper management. You should be funding your schools properly, and putting the kind of people in there that that wouldn't occur.

ZS: Mark, what do you think?

MP: I couldn't agree more. I think that it is a question of funding, and I think the thing that disturbs the folks that are voucher advocates the most is that you can't fix things on the cheap. Florida has chronically under-funded its schools for years and years and years. Gov. Graham, when he was in office, made an attempt to change that, and in fact got funding on the way up, and as he left office he backed the lottery, which was supposed to be an enhancement on the already improved funding. And since then, we've gone downhill, when Gov. Graham left office, Florida was 20th in per capita spending on schools, now we're 45th or 46th.

ZS: Do Paul's comments also go back to accountability? I mean-

MP: Well, There-there is-there is a question of accountability, if you're talking about voucher schools we've had plenty of questions already about some of them. You know there's been folks that have taken quite a bit of money from the state of Florida and have not provided any education, with kind of sham schools. There's people that had failed charter schools that closed them down and opened them up as voucher schools, despite the fact that they had been failed before, the state accepted them as voucher schools and started sending money to them that way. So I mean, there is a question of accountability in voucher schools, accountability is much, much, much more clear for public schools than it is for privates.

BS: Just if money were the answer the best schools in the country would be in the District of Columbia, where the per-pupil spending is the highest.

ZS: Alright I want to talk about our online poll now, we've got some response, we've got 30 responses so far, "Should taxpayer dollars be used to send children to private, non-religious schools or public schools outside their home district?", 90% say "no that should not happen," with 10% saying "yes, that that's okay", "Should taxpayer dollars be used to send children to religious schools?", 97% say "no", 3% say "that's okay", "Should taxpayer dollars only be used to improve the public schools?", 97% say "yes", 3% say "no", and then onto the Supreme Court decision, "How will the Florida Supreme Court rule on vouchers?", 80% say "they'll rule against vouchers", 20% say "they'll rule in favor of vouchers." So what do you all think about those numbers?

BS: I think we have public radio listeners, who are probably wondering "where's Diane Reams this morning?"

MP: I think that those numbers are a little bit higher than we normally see, but I think that that does express-does represent a feeling of a great many of Floridians.

ZS: Alright, heading into the Supreme Court decision on vouchers, this past legislative session there were a couple of initiatives to expand the programs pushed forth by Gov. Jeb Bush. Lawmakers didn't necessarily go for them, why not?

BS: I think the anticipation of the decision on vouchers has sort of put things on hold, until they find out, you know, why expand a program whose future is currently being challenged, so I guess they decided "we'll wait and see."

ZS: Okay. Mark?

MP: I would agree that that was a smart move on their part. These-the two programs that were up this legislative session were-would really expand the number of students that had the opportunity to go for vouchers, and it would've been a huge expansion on the three or four programs that are already out there.

ZS: Alright let's go back to the phones now, we have Bill on the line in Tallahassee. Bill, good morning.

Bill: Good morning. My one comment is this: changing schools and improving them, whether it be hiring new teachers, administrators, and things like that; these changes won't occur overnight. Many times they'll take a minimum of two years and up to ten years. In ten years you've pretty much put one single student through the majority of their school career, and definitely through that very important K-5 area. Don't you see that giving school vouchers is a way to give an individual an option to get proper and positive education while the school is improving? You don't want to trap the students in. And I'll take my comments off the air.

ZS: Thanks for your call Bill. Mark?

MP: You have to be certain that you're going to be sending your student to a high quality school, and it's difficult to tell that with a lot of the private schools. Many of them are brand new schools that are just online, so you can theoretically find a good school and hope that it's a good fit, but, you know, private schools, by and large, are no better or no worse than public schools. Yes, there individual private schools that are better than some public schools, there's individual public schools that are better than some private schools. And, so I'm not sure that that's a good solution.

BS: I agree with the caller's point.

ZS: Okay. Let's go back to the phones, we have Tom on the line in Tallahassee. Tom, good morning.

Tom: Hey. I'm still recovering from my laughing fit from the earlier statement that "public schools are far, far, far more accountable than private schools." Nothing could be more reverse from reality. And if anyone would be aware of that it would be somebody who works for the teachers' unions. It's the unions that make the public schools so unaccountable, because, how many times have you picked up the paper and seen some kind of debate going on, or someone's in trouble, but no action is taken because the teachers' unions have stepped in there, and you're not going to touch the teacher, you're not going to change anything there, "steady as she goes", and that's what's really fueling this entire debate. This isn't about what's good for the kids, they're trying to cast it in that light, but what it's really about is what's good for the unions. The private schools are not unionized, the public are unionized. They do not want to see any money from the public schools, from the unions, to the non-public schools, which are not unionized.

ZS: Okay let's get a response from Mark, we just have a couple of minutes left.

MP: We absolutely are concerned about the education quality, and we are also concerned about the rights of teachers, and when you hear sometimes that there's trouble, that's one side of the story. Teachers have right to due process that's in their contracts, and we're there to help to defend them in the case that there is trouble. But you know, in most cases there aren't trouble, there isn't trouble, and in most cases it's not that difficult to resolve these situations.

BS: I don't disagree that public schools, that teachers certainly deserve due process, however between tenure and some other things that have cropped up, it has been very difficult to evaluate teachers and to replace under-performing teachers.

ZS: Alright I think we'll have time for one more caller, let's go now to Patricia on the line in Tallahassee. Patricia, go ahead.

Patricia: Yes, good morning. I have a couple of comments really about school choice as an option.

ZS: Well quickly, we just have about a minute left.

Patricia: First I don't think it's an option, because the desirable schools are all over-capacity. And second in terms of improving schools through school choice, it's a fallacy. If you look at how many students are transferring from Leon High School or Chiles to say Rickards or Godby, then I think it's pretty apparent it's not a choice- it's not a way to improve schools, it's kind of disingenuous to publicize it as that. Thank you.

ZS: Alright well thanks for your call Patricia and quickly in just about the minute we have left, ultimately this is going to be in the state's high court next week, any timeframe on when we could see a ruling on this and how will that play out given that the next school year is not that far down the road.

BS: It's always hard to participate, but if the Court follows its' typical procedure, we would expect the written opinion to be issued sometime in July.

MP: It's always difficult to predict when the Court's going to make a decision on that, so. We hope that it's quickly resolved, no way of knowing.

ZS: But if they were to rule against vouchers, would it affect kids heading into the upcoming school year?

BS: Well we're only talking about 719 kids statewide in the Opportunity Scholarship program-

ZS: Right. Would they be affected by that?

BS: That would be a very-unless there is an appeal that stays the effect of the ruling, but if there were not an appeal, it would be a very absorbable number. What is worrisome is the other programs that have tens of thousands of kids, and especially Bright Futures.

ZS: Alright well that's all for this edition of "Perspectives". I want to thank all of our callers for taking part and those who took part in our online poll, and our in-studio guests, Mark Pudlow and Bob Sanchez. Taylor Cox is our technical director, and we had technical assistance from Dorothy St. Jean. And for 88.9 FM, WFSU Tallahassee, I'm Zach Seidenberg, thank you for joining us.