

Rotten Apples

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If there were lingering doubts that teachers unions are the worms in the apple of the American education system, take a look at the monumental setback for school reform in Florida this week.

On Monday the unions in Tallahassee bullied all but one Democrat and four Republicans in the state senate to kill a school voucher bill that has already had a sterling record of success for thousands of children in districts with failing public schools. If that decision isn't reversed by Friday, one of the most heralded school reform measures anywhere in the country will be dismantled, and 775 school kids, 90% of whom are minorities, will be returned to the warehouses that are failed inner-city schools. A related voucher program that serves 18,000 learning disabled kids is also in jeopardy.

The program at issue is Governor Jeb Bush's seven-year-old "Florida A+ School Accountability and Choice Program." For the first time, schools have been graded on the reading, writing and math progress made by the children they are supposed to be teaching. (Imagine that.) Any school that received an F in two of four years is deemed a failure, and the kids then get a voucher to attend another school, public or private.

One immediate impact -- according to researchers at Harvard, Florida State, and the James Madison Institute -- has been that the mere threat of competition caused many inner-city school districts to improve. The percentage of African Americans who are now performing at or above grade level surged to 66% last year, from 23% in 1999. No union-backed school "reform" has had that rate of success -- not more funding, not higher teacher pay, not smaller class sizes, and so on. Two school districts in the state failed the program and the families were given vouchers. Those children have since made big academic gains.

But in one of the most absurd legal decisions in modern times, the Florida Supreme Court ruled 5-2 that the voucher program violated the "uniformity clause" of the state constitution guaranteeing a high-quality system of public schools. Because the performance of the voucher kids was *superior* to those in public schools, the court ruled that education was not uniform -- or in this case not uniformly miserable. As they used to say in the Soviet Union, everyone gets to share their poverty equally.

Governor Bush and minority families throughout the state were so enraged that they vowed to change the state constitution through a vote of the people to allow the A+ Program to go forward. But the state senate this week failed by one vote to allow that referendum to take place. Union pressure was so intense that the GOP state senate majority leader broke with his own party, his own governor and the pleas of parents and voted to topple the measure; he was removed from leadership by his fellow Republicans on Tuesday.

We're not sure whom to hold in highest contempt here: the four Republicans who buckled to union pressure, the Democrats who voted en masse against the interests of their own constituents, or the unions that pretend their political actions are in the interests of "the children" -- except when that conflicts with their own economic self interest.

The senate Republican president says he will force one more vote before Friday. The lone Democrat to vote for the measure, state senator Al Lawson, charged that his fellow party representatives, including other black members, put their fealty to the unions ahead of what's best for poor children. "Don't their parents have a right, when they pay taxes, to have their kids get the best education?" he asked.

In Florida, at least for now, the sad answer is no. And what is worse is that this week the unions and their Democratic allies -- who claim to represent these black and Hispanic families -- are celebrating their triumph in relegating another generation of children to their educational ghetto.