

School vouchers a threat to our democracy



Your Turn

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Guest columnist

Our nation's public school system, symbolizing our values of equal opportunity, diversity and respect for all, has enabled many to achieve success, prosperity and full participation in our society.

The Florida Constitution fittingly requires provision by the state of "a uniform, efficient, safe, secure and high quality system of free public schools that allows students to obtain a high quality education."

The separation of church and state, an essential ingredient in the success of our democracy, has been a key guiding principle in the public schools. The passage of SB202 and HBI (voucher bills) in the 2023 session of the Florida Legislature threatens this separation and the very survival of the Florida public school system, which now educates 87% of Florida students.

Indeed, our democracy is threatened!

Under this legislation, every one of the 2.9 million public school-age children in our state will be eligible for vouchers worth approximately \$7,775, whether their parents are farm workers or CEOs with a private jet. Even children who are home-schooled or currently attending private schools are eligible.

Dr. Norin Dollard of the Florida Policy Institute estimates that this will cost Florida \$4 billion. The Education Law Center estimates that the program will financially gut already underfunded public school districts as vouchers drain monies from their coffers.

It is stunning that this destruction is occurring in a state which already pays their teachers the 48th lowest salaries in the nation!

In Lee County, the program will reroute \$88 million to private schools.

The motivation behind this massive expansion of the Florida voucher system is a thinly veiled agenda to promote Christian nationalism. It is easier to promote this agenda in unregulated, unaccredited private schools. where even

those without a college education can teach.

Of 2,300 private Florida schools, 69% are unaccredited, according to a Hechinger Report. Approximately 80% are religious. Reports on educational quality (Brookings, et al) report consistent drops in math scores generally in these schools and scanty oversight.

Voucher-accepting private schools in Lee and Collier counties responded with "NA" (not applicable or not available) when recently asked to list accreditation standards. (And how will the state evaluate home-schooled children to ensure that they are receiving a quality education?) In addition, there is no oversight regarding discrimination against students regarding their race, sexual orientation, religion and disabilities.

Paradoxically, the Interfaith Alliance of Southwest Florida, consisting of individuals with a diversity of belief systems, was recently developed in response to the dangerous rise of those who would threaten true religious freedom in our schools in the name of "Christian religious freedom!"

Everyone in our rapidly changing society has the freedom to practice the religion (or lack thereof) of their choice without being indoctrinated in a narrow, distorted "religious" agenda of those utilizing religion as a power vehicle. We live in a global society and must embrace cultural and religious diversity as ingredients of a vibrant, progressive society. We must not move backwards. Our democracy depends on it!

Jeanne Goldberg, M.D., is a retired radiologist, a published science writer, an active member of a variety of environmental organizations, and a supporter of research at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. She has served as a literacy volunteer, as chair of the American Cancer Society Florida Division Breast Cancer Task Force, and is currently supporting Generation Skeptics, an innovative Center for Inquiry program teaching K-12 students critical thinking skills. She is an active member of UUCGN (Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Greater Naples) in addition to the newly formed Interfaith Alliance of Southwest Florida.