



Back-to-School Alert 3rd in a series from CER

FLORIDA PUBLIC SCHOOLS STRIVE TO STAY OFF FAILING SCHOOL LIST *First state-wide voucher program explodes myths*

(9/10/99) Since the law in Florida allowing scholarships for children in failing schools was ratified five months ago, dozens of public schools have stepped up efforts to improve.

"These efforts are demonstrating the powerful ripple effect that just the possibility of school choice can have," said CER Research Director David DeSchryver. "Prior to the Florida *A+ Plan*, many Florida public schools were coasting on mediocre test scores and social promotion. Since the first schools made the F List this year, however, schools are rushing to change the way they do business," DeSchryver said. Consider:

- Less than a week after the state graded every school in May, teachers at Chester Taylor Elementary in Pasco County met "to brainstorm ways to boost scores next year," including possibly hiring university professors to better train teachers, according to the *St. Petersburg Times*.
- Broward County superintendent Frank Till said the *A+ Plan* "will drive reform in the district." His associate superintendent said they'd be developing "a support system to keep schools off the F List."
- The last time the state raised the standards, said the president of the Broward Teachers Union, "we worked hard and got all of the schools off the critically low-performing list, and we'll do it again."
- Said Wayne Blanton, president of the Florida Association of School Boards, when it became clear the bill would become law. "We're going to work very, very hard to make sure every student has the opportunity to succeed without having failing schools."

Florida school officials are closely watching for any signs of weak programs or personnel. Said CER's DeSchryver, "While it will take more than reactive, stop-gap measures to reverse years of mediocrity, the impact of the *A+ Plan* is already evident. And that's after just 140 children have chosen to use an opportunity scholarship. Imagine how schools might respond if the numbers increase!"

This year, 900 students in two schools in Escambia County were eligible for Opportunity Scholarships, and statewide, 78 schools received Fs. If those schools remain on the F list, 2,000 students can qualify to attend school elsewhere.



Opponents Desperate. Despite the positive ripple effect of school choice on the Milwaukee school district over the last five years, The People for the American Way and the NAACP, continue to do all they can to keep Milwaukee's children out of their classrooms of choice. They've complained to the State Education Department with allegations that the schools were violating the random selection requirements: charging voucher students extra fees, having parents sign commitment statements that pledge volunteer hours, not honoring some student's right to opt out of religious activities and classes, and favoring certain students with their enrollment schedules. However, they couldn't find any real parents to say so, and thus contracted with the Metropolitan Milwaukee Fair Housing Council to have people pose as parents of potential students and ask private school officials a series of leading questions. Despite the money spent to unearth alleged violations, the state has not sanctioned any of the schools, and no children have ever been turned away from any of them. "If that's the best they can do in a sting operation, {these claims} are not particularly troublesome," said local activist George Mitchell.