



the
CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM

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April 19, 2013

The Honorable Will Weatherford
Speaker of the House
Florida House of Representatives
420 The Capitol
402 South Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399

Dear Speaker Weatherford,

I am writing in my capacity as President of the Center for Education Reform and a long time supporter and advisor to many Floridians on education reform, including the more than 20,000 Florida residents we count as members and supporters. The Center for Education Reform, since 1993, is the leading resource, voice and advocate for lasting, substantive and structural education reform in the U.S. We believe all quality educational options should be equitably treated and affirm the evidence that when more students have such options, all children thrive.

As you know, there are several education bills moving through the Florida General Assembly right now that have serious implications for nearly 150,000 children in your state if passed. Both HB 5101 and HB 7029 will reduce funding for historically successful state online learning programs. These funding models that are in question should be given careful consideration and deliberation and I'd like to make sure you are aware of some inaccuracies in the dialogue surrounding these bills and the implications that this legislation has on Florida's students.

Florida has been recently ranked the number two state in the nation for providing maximum opportunities to parents, in The Parent Power Index © (PPI). The PPI gauges parents' access to quality educational options for their children, with online learning being a key factor in our grading system. These proposed bills would severely hinder online programs in your state to operate effectively and thus would lower Florida's ranking as a leader and innovator in providing quality education options, particularly in online learning. Not only that, but it would negatively impact school districts operating online schools and cut into their bottom line as well, potentially costing millions.

One shining example of successful implementation of online learning is the Florida Virtual School (FLVS), a program that was started back in 1997 by a piece of legislation that the Florida legislature passed. FLVS represents the gold standard of online learning and it sets a bar to be met by everybody in providing public education, not just online providers. FLVS already receives less "per student funding" and is only paid when students successfully complete the coursework, unlike brick-and-mortar schools. We believe that the impact of these changes will increase the potential for academic integrity issues and decrease the effectiveness of a program that consistently performs strongly across all metrics. Please don't dismantle a funding model that will impact quality, access and choice for children and put thousands of high school students at risk next year given the online learning graduation requirement.

Opening up Florida's educational landscape is a healthy and natural next step, but not at the cost of students. All of the online providers with whom we work in Florida welcome healthy competition and work with numerous other providers in order to create an environment that is constantly raising the bar. But it is important not to cut funding for students in order to divert funds to private providers. We need to adequately fund both programs otherwise we are doing students a disservice.

As established leaders in bringing awareness to issues that directly impact technology-based education and supports activities and policies that remove barriers, we must express deep concern over the concepts put forth in Florida House Bills 5101 and 7029. In their current forms, these pieces of legislation would impede Florida's young students and future leaders from getting access to the best possible education by reducing the incentive for all schools to grow their online coursework and cutting funding for leading providers.

Thank you for your time and considering these additional facts in your decision. We will be sharing our views with the press as well as helping advocates nationwide become aware of the challenges they may similarly face if these proposals go through.

Please contact me if I can be of assistance or help you with additional facts supporting the importance of equity for all educational options.

Best Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jeanne". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

Jeanne Allen
President

cc:
Representative Janet Adkins
Representative Michael Bileca
Representative Erik Fresen
Senator Don Gaetz
Senator John Legg
Representative Marlene O'Toole
Representative Elizabeth Porter
Senator Kelli Stargel
Senator John Thrasher