

# St. Petersburg Times

*Published Friday, September 12, 2008*

## Foes join voucher group

**By Ron Matus**  
Times Staff Writer

The new head of the leading voucher group in Florida is a former teachers union leader who once said vouchers were "based on false assumptions and faulty logic."

His hiring may be another sign that the bitter political lines over vouchers are not as hard and fast as they were just a few years ago.

Doug Tuthill, 52, is the new president of the Florida School Choice Fund, which raises money for the state's \$118-million corporate tax credit voucher program and awards vouchers to low-income children. He was hired by John Kirtley, a Tampa businessman who rivals former Gov. Jeb Bush as the most influential voucher advocate in the state.

"I don't think the enemy is educators or parents or public schools or private schools," said Tuthill, who headed the Pinellas union from 1991 to 1995. "The enemy is ignorance and poverty and hopelessness and despair."

Tuthill's hiring comes at a particularly heady time for vouchers, which allow some students to use government subsidies to attend private schools.

Tuthill isn't the only new blood at the Florida School Choice Fund.

Joining him as communications director is Jon East, a former St. Petersburg Times editorial

writer. Until his retirement last week, East for years was a persistent critic of vouchers.

Last week, the Florida Supreme Court knocked two amendments off the November ballot that sought to shield existing voucher programs from future legal challenges, and to pave the way for an expansion. But while supporters are still smarting from the ruling, they're emboldened by a steady trickle of Democrats in the Florida Legislature who have been crossing over to their side.

Voucher critics say the other camp is methodically targeting potential defectors.

"Assimilation is a very astute political tactic," said Damien Filer, political director for Progress Florida, a group critical of vouchers. "But I don't think that it's going to change the fact that vouchers have been shown, over and over again, to have failed" as good policy.

Until Tuthill's hiring last month, the Florida School Choice Fund in Tampa was headed by Kirtley, a venture capitalist who is also active with voucher issues nationally. Kirtley said he wanted a replacement who was in tune on vouchers and other education issues but also had solid management experience.

Tuthill previously ran an education consulting firm. He also served as chief operating officer for Creative Loafing Media,

which prints alternative newspapers in four cities, including Tampa.

"It was both the philosophical and the practical that made this so appealing," Kirtley said.

Tuthill said he has long supported school choice options and increased opportunities for low-income families. He said his past opposition to vouchers was based on proposals for universal vouchers - vouchers for all families - with no accountability or government regulation.

People say, "'Gee, Doug, you suddenly flipped your position on school choice.' That's not true," Tuthill said.

Tuthill said he heard many of the same arguments now raised against vouchers when he helped set up the International Baccalaureate program at St. Petersburg High School in the early 1980s. "Our argument was all we're trying to do is create more learning options (for kids)," he said.

"My core values are the same," said East, the former Times editorial writer. But, "I sincerely feel that (tax credit vouchers) don't compete with or undermine public education, which is different than the way I used to feel."

Told where East was now working, Mark Pudlow, the usually affable spokesman for the state teachers union, groaned and declined comment.