

February 20, 2010

A weekend interview with Shannon Coates, a Florida school voucher recipient



The Florida Legislature's [plan to expand the corporate tax credit scholarship program](#) has garnered a lot of [criticism](#) lately, from the state's teachers union and [even from the St. Petersburg Times](#). Not all the reaction is negative though. Shannon Coates, a St. Petersburg mom who uses the program for her fifth-grade daughter, Taylor Barnes, is a huge backer of the vouchers and their growth. Coates talked with reporter Jeff Solochek about her rationale.

How did you learn about the program in the first place?

I learned about it from the principal of her original school that she went to for kindergarten. ... I never thought about private school to be honest with you. My mom is a public school educator. I went through the public school system. And when my daughter was going to kindergarten they had the choice program. That was like the first year of choice for Pinellas County. And of course with my educational background, with my family background and everything, I did not procrastinate. I think it was the first or second day that it opened up that I was there putting down my first five choices. I looked online to learn about the schools, I went and visited several schools to see which ones I wanted to be my top choices. And sadly to say I didn't get any of my choices. That's when I got concerned about my public school choices.

Where was she supposed to go?

When they called me, they called me at my job ... to tell me I did not get any of my five choices, and these are the schools they have available. And they gave me a list of schools. And all of the schools they gave me were north county. That didn't work for me. For one, my daughter is legally disabled. She at that time was dealing with asthma very badly. I remember asking the lady at that time, How is she supposed to get to these schools? She said, Oh, we have a wonderful bus system that will take her. I said, Hold on. I'm not going to put my 5-year-old on a bus to go way north county when she has medical issues and I can't get to her in a timely manner if something goes wrong. ... I just couldn't picture myself putting her on a school bus just to ride for God knows how long. I just couldn't fathom it. At that point I still didn't know what I was going to do. My mom tried using some of her resources.

You said she is a teacher.

She's an administrator. She's been with the public school system over 20 years. She's currently an administrator in Kuwait. She left three years ago. ... So I have a tremendous educational background. And my first thing was to try to get her into the best schools. And you know it's sad the best schools were in south county and I couldn't even get her in any of the schools. It's crazy. And also, which was frustrating for me, she was already at one of the schools that I chose, actually my first choice, which was Perkins Elementary. She was there for their pre-k program. ... And she still didn't get in. That was devastating to me.

So then somebody said to you, you should consider this other option?

Right. Actually, a friend of mine. She came to me and she said, You know, my kids go to a private school. And I'm like, really? And she said, Yeah, it's called Yvonne C. Reed Christian School. Why don't you go talk to Mrs. Reed ... and let her know what is going on and see if they still have a kindergarten opening. Because it was getting closer to school getting ready to start. And so I went, I talked to Mrs. Reed and she gave me the prices and everything. I said, I really can't afford to pay this. And she said, Well, here's an application. There's a scholarship program, Florida Pride, [Step Up For Students](#). Why don't you try filling out the application and see if you qualify. I was like, Okay. I had never heard of it or anything. I said, Okay. And she was so nice. She said, Just bring her until you find out if you get the scholarship or not. To me that was just heartfelt. I was like, Thank you.

So I applied for the scholarship and I got it, and she's been on it ever since. And it's the best thing that ever happened. Because I was too devastated to put my kid on a bus to go to north county when I know I did everything I was supposed to do. I wasn't a procrastinator. I didn't wait until the last possible day to go down there and fill out the forms. I did my research. I visited schools. I did all of that that I was supposed to do as a parent. And the public school system failed me as a parent. And that hurt a lot ... It turned out for me to be the best thing that ever happened, actually.

Now, a lot of people say that this is a Republican idea that is designed to destroy the public school system. But I hear a lot of people from communities that you wouldn't consider to be Republican communities who, like you say, think this is the greatest thing to ever happen to them.

Yeah. I don't see how it's destroying the public school system at all. This is empowering parents. This is giving parents a choice to say, You know what? No. I'm not going to put my kid on that bus and have to worry every single day about their safety. Now I have a choice to say, No, my kid is going to go to the school that is maybe five minutes away from my house. And they're giving me a chance to do that and give her the education that she deserves.

What do you think about the people who criticize the use of state money, tax money, for this purpose? They say, if you want to go to private school, pay for it yourself.

Well, first of all, I mean they have to look at the statistics. Honestly, it is saving the state money. What is it they pay? \$7,000 per kid. [We're only getting \\$3,950](#). And for some parents we're still paying over that. Because some of the schools that we've chosen for our kids are a little more expensive than the

\$3,950 that we're getting. So we're still struggling. Because we care about our children's education, we're willing to struggle and make sacrifices to pay that extra money to get the best education that we feel is possible for them.

Do you think that the idea to expand the program to more families and perhaps even a larger amount is a good thing?

Oh, it would be an awesome thing. I mean, to be able to know that more kids can benefit from this, more parents can realize it's really up to them. Because who knows the kids better than the parents? Nobody can tell me anything about my daughter that I don't already know. ... So I'm the one to know what education is going to be best for her, what school she is going to succeed the best at. And to be able to open that up to so many more parents, so they can realize that, Hey. I know so many parents who don't like the school where their kids are at, but what can they do? There is so much more you can do with them being able to expand this program to other families and to raise the price. That would be phenomenal. Even for me. Because I struggle to pay that extra that I have to pay for my daughter to go to school. But I do it because she's worth it to me. She's worth me sacrificing whatever extra money I might have to get the best education possible. So it would totally be beneficial if they did raise it. Because private school can be expensive.

Your daughter is in fifth grade. Next year comes middle school. What are your plans?

They go through eighth grade, thank God. So she'll stay where she's at. She's looking forward to it. ... What's great about this school she's at is they offer everything that I got in the public school system. ... They have the band, chorus, art program. They have clubs. Everything. And, so, what is she really missing out on?

It doesn't sound like you have any plans to go back to the public school system.

I don't. I honestly don't. No. I'm happy. And she is happy. And she is doing well. It's kind of like the old saying, Why fix it if it's not broken? She's doing well. And who's to say if I had another kid maybe she would do great in public school? And maybe I would get the choices I wanted. ... Maybe I would be able to get them in the fundamental school, or the magnet school, and they would do great. I don't have any other family members in private school. ... The great thing about that is, they got the public schools they wanted their kids to go to. My friends, they are in fundamental schools. My sister's kids, they're in magnet schools. They were able get their choices. And that was the problem for me. I wasn't able to. So I had to make a decision as a parent and say, Am I just going to deal with whatever school they give me and hope for the best education? Or, am I going to make a choice to give her the best education? So that's what I had to do. And I'm just thankful that Step Up For Students is there, the corporate tax scholarship is there for people that normally would not be able to afford. I'm not rich. I can't afford to just, hey, let me pay \$7,000 a year, \$8,000 a year to send my kid to school. I can't do it. But, you know, it's great they have this for families that normally would not be able to give their children this type of education.

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