

New coalition of school board members rises in Florida to challenge the status quo

By Jeff Bergosh | Watchdog Arena



Jeff Bergosh

In the fall of 2014, a lawsuit was initiated in Florida court by the NAACP, the Florida School Boards Association (FSBA) and the Florida Education Association (FEA), the state's largest teacher's union. This lawsuit challenged the state's school choice initiative, a tax credit scholarship supporting the education of nearly 70,000 poor and minority Florida students. Many individual Florida school board members were incensed by this lawsuit—they were neither consulted, nor did they support this action.

At the FSBA's winter conference in Tampa a few months after the suit was filed, an attempt was made by many conservative members of the FSBA to change direction. This group of members at the conference pushed for a vote to change the FSBA platform to not oppose the expansion of the tax credit scholarship. They also they pressed for a vote to drop the suit, but this vote was not allowed to go forward because the FSBA executive committee said it was not an agenda item; the suit had already been approved by the FSBA and initiated, according to Sarasota County Florida School Board Member Bridget Zeigler.

"There was a lot of yelling and screaming at that meeting—it was extremely frustrating" Zeigler said recently.

As it became clear throughout the state that the Florida School Boards Association would not listen to their members and drop their support of the lawsuit, several school board members in Florida decided it was time for a new organization.

In January 2015, a group of board members decided to create the Florida Coalition of School Board Members, to become a conservative voice of advocacy for statewide educational policies and positions. This group includes School Board members from throughout Florida.

The goals of this organization are fairly straightforward; Erika Donalds, a founding member of FCSBM who serves in Collier County (Naples), Florida, voiced some of these concerns on a media conference call on Monday from Tallahassee, Florida.

"The FSBA has lost touch with the citizens whose tax dollars fund their existence—but our new coalition will represent the interests of ALL Florida students and their families and will assist the legislature with policies to support the future of excellent education in Florida" she stated.

Shawn Frost, a newly elected school board member from Indian River County (Vero Beach) Florida, stated his rationale for joining this new coalition, saying "K-12 education today is filled with opportunities and choices. Students take courses in many different settings using many different delivery meth-

ods. We need to embrace what's best for all students—including permitting parents and students to select individual educational experiences that best meet their needs...no matter who is providing that education."

The Florida School Boards Association, Florida's previous sole provider for School Board Member training and advocacy, has members from nearly every Florida County. Although this well-funded organization takes in approximately \$1.7M in annual taxpayer funded member dues, in recent years FSBA has found itself at odds with several initiatives coming from the state legislature and newly re-elected Florida Governor Rick Scott. This has alienated FSBA from many conservative school board members in the process.



FSBA's record is clear: they've resisted reform to tenure procedures, they resisted an easing of the budget-busting class size mandate, and then recently they've gone to war on school choice by suing the legislature trying to end the tax-credit scholarships for 70,000 poor students and families statewide.

This new coalition supports school choice for Florida parents. It supports the use of technology to provide a platform for communications between elected board members and constituents, as well as professional development delivered to members online. This will save taxpayers money on travel and lodging expenses and will streamline new board member training.

This new statewide group officially launched Monday, with the near-term goal of growing membership over the next few weeks. The long range goals include providing board members an alternative choice in advocacy, the expansion of choice options for Florida students and families, enhancement of local control with state-level accountability, a more student-focused perspective in educational policy, and fiscal responsibility at all levels of board governance.

A mixer event featuring several statewide elected officials and other influential Floridians has been scheduled for Wednesday, March 11th in Tallahassee, at which time the founding members of the coalition expect to have 40 to 50 new members from around the state.

Jeff Bergosh is the founding president of FCSBM, which has a newly launched web presence at <http://www.FCSBM.org>.