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Florida School Board Association opts out of voucher suit

By Mel Leonor

The Florida School Board Association will no longer be part of a suit against the state's school voucher program.

FSBA's presence on the suit ended Wednesday evening, when its board of directors voted 21-9 in favor of untying the organization from future legal action on the case.

The decision follows a May 18 ruling by a Florida circuit judge dismissing the suit against Florida's Tax Credit Scholarship program.

The lawsuit, filed by the Florida Education Association, FSBA and others, challenged the constitutionality of the program, which funds scholarships for private school students through tax credits for corporations that support the program.

Andy Griffiths, who represents the Collier County School Board on the FSBA board of directors, said in an interview that directors were presented with three options: proceed with an appeal, proceed with the appeal but discontinue financial support towards it, or drop out of the case all together.

Griffith said he favored the second option — keep FSBA's name on the suit, but close the checkbook — “but obviously that opinion didn't carry the day.” Representatives of Palm Beach, Broward, Sarasota, Charlotte, Brevard, Polk and Pinellas counties also voted against completely dropping the suit.

Griffith, who also represents Monroe, Glades and Hendry counties, said that the boards he represents had increasingly

objected to the use of taxpayer funds to support a suit many of their constituents don't support.

FSBA is funded by membership dues paid by school boards in the state. These dollars come directly from taxpayers.

In Collier, both school board members Erika Donalds and Kelly Litcher have spoken in favor of it. Earlier this year, Donalds became a founding member of the Florida Coalition of School Board Members, an organization meant to parallel the work of the FSBA and that was born out of discontent with FSBA's support of the voucher suit.

Donalds has also proposed that Collier stop its membership with FSBA because of the organization's support of this suit.

During Tuesday's school board meeting — in a rare instance of all-around agreement — Collier County School Board members said they didn't support FSBA moving forward with an appeal.

“I believe that once a lawsuit has been sent back by the judge, that we should move on,” said board member Roy Terry. “I don't believe we should pursue this lawsuit.”

The other plaintiff on the suit is the Florida Education Association, the state's preeminent teacher's union. Their funds largely come from fees paid by teachers from their salaries. The FEA has until next week to file an appeal.