

Tampa Bay Times



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April 26, 2016

Tampa businessman cautions against dismantling school choice in Florida

By Kristen M. Clark



Tampa venture capitalist John Kirtley spoke to the Economic Club of Florida on Tuesday.

Speaking to the Economic Club of Florida today in Tallahassee, Tampa venture capitalist John Kirtley likened the push for "school choice" in Florida's public education system to the Cold War divisions the Berlin Wall illustrated.

East Berlin, he said, was like today's traditional public school system -- "where decisions were made at the top" and a uniform system applied to everyone -- whereas West Berlin offered freedom and economic opportunities.

"I think that it's just too hard, even if you have the best people, to manage a huge system from the top down and allocate resources that way," Kirtley told a crowd of about 150 people at the Economic Club luncheon. "If parents were empowered to choose, it would be better for teachers, better for parents and better for students."

Kirtley has been an influential voice in education in the Sunshine State. He fought 15 years ago for lawmakers to create the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program and now serves as chairman of Step Up for Students, the main organization that doles out those voucher-like scholarships to help poor children attend private school.

He has numerous other roles on the boards of national and state pro-"school choice" organizations and, in recent years, has given hundreds of thousands of dollars in political contributions to get "school choice" advocates elected to county school boards and the Florida Legislature.

"I just strongly believe that low-income parents have to be empowered to do what's best for their child to prevent their child from becoming a statistic," he said.

He spent much of his 25-minute speech and 15-minute question-and-answer session explaining the benefits of allowing school choice, whether through charter schools, virtual schools or voucher-like programs that help poor or disabled students, such as the Tax Credit Scholarship.

The Tax Credit Scholarship program remains under fire in the courts. It offers dollar-for-dollar tax credits -- as much as \$447 million this year, growing to \$560 million in 2016-17 -- to businesses that donate to organizations (primarily Step Up for Students) that fund the scholarships.

The Florida Education Association, the state's largest teachers union, is leading a lawsuit that seeks to declare the program unconstitutional. They argue that steering taxpayer dollars to private schools reduces available dollars that traditional public schools could get. A state appeals court will hear arguments in the lawsuit next month.

(Several thousand parents and children rallied in Tallahassee in January to urge the FEA to drop its lawsuit.)

"They say this program isn't uniform or the same as traditional public schools," Kirtley said. "Is uniformity really the principle around which we need to organize in the 21st century?"

Kirtley bemoaned the potential consequences should the lawsuit succeed. He said the 80,000 students who benefit from the program "will be evicted from schools that are working for them."

"District schools and taxpayers will suffer," too, he said -- estimating it would cost \$2 billion to build new schools to fit even half of the students back in the public schools system.

He also said it could potentially jeopardize the constitutionality of other school choice opportunities, such as taxpayer-funded Pre-K programs, charter schools and Florida Virtual School.

"Florida is a leader, probably the leader, in the country toward this new definition of public education," Kirtley said. "Raising taxpayer dollars to educate children and let parents direct those dollars to different providers and different delivery methods that best serve their children's needs."

Economic Club Chairman David Mica noted that the club has heard previously from advocates of traditional public schools, so he said Kirtley offered another perspective in the public dialogue.

"We know John has a particular point of view and I think it's important," Mica said. "It's good to hear both sides. ... These are good times for healthy discussions."