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Site Navigation

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NEWS

Get more local control with smaller school districts

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By Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters

A referendum on November's ballot would constitutionally mandate smaller class sizes as a way toward much-needed improvements in Florida education. Those in favor of the amendment have the right inclination -- "big is bad" -- but they are looking in the wrong place. For Florida education, the size of its classrooms is less of a problem than the size of its school districts.

Rather than focusing on the expensive undertaking of reducing class size throughout the state, Florida should reduce the size of its school districts. City-based school districts would be better able to respond to the needs of individual communities than the current countywide monoliths. The enormous size of Florida's countywide school districts limits the options parents have for educating their children, alienates local communities from their neighborhood schools, and produces one-size-fits-all attempts at reform.

In most of the country, parents have more easily available educational options because they can move to the district whose schools best serve their children's needs. Countywide school districts limit this type of choice by increasing the expense and inconvenience involved in moving from a failing district to a better one. Moving to another county could mean changing jobs, leaving behind friends and family, and possibly a drastic change in lifestyle.

City-based school districts allow greater freedom for parents to move from schools that are failing to schools that could provide better futures for their children. Allowing for greater school choice is a reliable way not only to help those who have the opportunity to move to another city, but also to improve education for all students. When parents can move to where the best schools are, schools have an incentive to compete for students by providing a better education.

Research by the Manhattan Institute and by Harvard economist Caroline Hoxby shows that areas with smaller school districts produce significantly better student outcomes, with lower per-pupil expenditures.

Smaller city-based school districts can unite local residents with their neighborhood schools, providing benefits to both parties. Communities benefit from improved school districts in the form of real estate values and community pride. Schools would benefit by being part of a community more directly invested in their success. Such invested communities would provide greater input for schools and would be far more likely to support bond issues and school levies.

School problems are difficult, if not impossible, to solve with broad, sweeping measures. No two schools are alike.

Before Florida voters attempt to fix education by approving a multibillion-dollar constitutional amendment to lower class sizes, they would do well to consider changing the structure of their school

districts instead.

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