

Christians considering Florida school voucher proposal

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Christian groups are taking a wait and see attitude toward a new school voucher program passed by the Florida legislature, the first such plan in the country.

“Vouchers are a marvelous idea,” says Dr. Dino Padrone, Pastor of Miami’s New Testament Baptist Church. “Our concern is whether they will come with strings attached.” Padrone’s church operates two Christian schools with a combined enrollment of 1,750.

Under the law, which Governor Jeb Bush proposed and has promised to sign, schools will be graded each year. Students in failing public schools would be eligible to take the money the state pays for their education—about \$4,000 a year—and use the voucher to cover the cost of attending any school they choose, including private religious schools.

Sister Elise Kennedy, principal at St. Pius V Parish School in Jacksonville told the *Times Union* newspaper that vouchers would be a positive force. They will "allow parents who are on the lower end of the economic scale to have the option of sending their children to a school with a Christian environment," she said.

Padrone agreed, noting that in his multi-cultural school many families are excluded by the \$6,000 per year tuition. But he is worried that accepting state funds may affect the emphasis of his schools. “We see the schools as an extension of the theology of what the church believes,” he says.

Some schools are refusing to participate in the program. “Due to the strictures, we cannot participate by accepting (voucher) students, although we would love to be able to do so,” says Ken Wackes, Headmaster of Ft. Lauderdale’s Westminster Academy, a private Christian school with an enrollment of over 1,200. “We would be required to set aside our mission statement and several of our normal processes.”

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