



Galvano says Supreme Court makeover could prompt 'bold' education reforms

By Zac Anderson
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More conservative bench could open door to resurrect discarded legislation

State Senate President Bill Galvano told a Sarasota business audience Tuesday that the more conservative Florida Supreme Court being fashioned by Gov. Ron DeSantis could pave the way for education reforms that had been struck down in the past.

"We have a new court," Galvano, R-Bradenton, told a sold-out crowd of 270 at the Argus Foundation event, adding that the more conservative court could prompt lawmakers to push "some issues that in the past we probably wouldn't have."

"You'll probably see some more bold steps in education and revisiting some of the ideas that Gov. Bush brought to the table back in the day," Galvano said.

Former Gov. Jeb Bush championed vouchers during his 1998 campaign and pushed through legislation the next year that offered students state money so they could transfer from low-performing public schools and attend private schools.

It was the first statewide school voucher program in the nation and it was quickly challenged in court. The Florida Supreme Court ruled in 2006 that lawmakers violated language in the state constitution stating that "adequate provision shall be made by law for a uniform, efficient, safe, secure and high quality system of free public schools."

The voucher program "diverts public dollars into separate private systems parallel to and in competition with the free public schools that are the sole means set out in the Constitution for the state to provide for the education of Florida's children," according to the ruling. "This diversion not only reduces money available to the free schools, but also funds private schools that are not 'uniform' when compared with each other or the public system."

But by then GOP leaders already had figured out a way around the constitution. In 2001 they set up a system that gives corporations tax credits if they dedicate the money to private school vouchers doled out by nonprofits.

A more conservative Supreme Court could give lawmakers additional flexibility to expand vouchers. DeSantis already has appointed two conservative judges to replace two liberal-leaning judges who are retiring. The new governor gets one more Supreme Court appointment. His appointees are expected to move the court in a much more conservative direction.

"I think we can look comprehensively about how could we be the most bold going forward," Galvano said after the event at the Hyatt Regency Sarasota.

There is talk of expanding the use of "education savings accounts" for students, Galvano said.

The group EdChoice describes ESAs as publicly funded accounts that often allow students to pay for private school tuition and a range of other educational services, such as tutoring or community college. Florida currently has an ESA for disabled students, and five other states have some type of ESA, according to EdChoice.

An ESA that's available to all Florida students essentially would act as a universal voucher, a concept that is strongly opposed by many public education advocates.

Galvano touched on a variety of other issues during his 26-minute speech and answered questions from the audience.



Former Sarasota County commissioner Jon Thaxton asked Galvano if affordable housing advocates should hold out hope for full funding of such programs. The state's affordable housing trust funds often are swept by the Legislature, with some of the money used to fund other budget priorities.

Galvano said he hopes to protect the housing money this year.

Another question focused on blue-green algae and red tide and what the Legislature is going to do differently this year to combat the algae problems.

"Are we going to fund another study? What is going to be different?" the questioner asked.

Galvano said he wants concrete actions to try to mitigate the algae problems.

"Funding is going to be a big part, but it's going to be programs, not just studies," he said.

Article last accessed on January 16, 2019 [here](#).