

# ESCAMBIA COUNTY COUNCIL OF PTA/PTSA<sub>s</sub>

## INFORMATIONAL NEWSLETTER ON H.R. 610

FACTS ON THE PROPOSAL

4/6/2017

PUBLISHED BY: ECCPTA

### *SUMMARY OF THE BILL, BY PTA REPRESENTATIVE PATTY HIGHTOWER*

I have been asked to provide information on U.S. House Bill 610, a bill to distribute federal funds for elementary and secondary education in the form of vouchers for eligible students and to repeal a certain rule relating to nutrition standards in schools. The bill was introduced on January 23 and at this time has not been heard in any committees, so nothing is happening. PTA has a position opposing vouchers citing the lack of accountability standards required of public schools. You can review this position and others at [www.floridapta.org](http://www.floridapta.org). Since PTA is a non-partisan organization, I am providing the basic language of the bill so that you can evaluate its impact. If you would like to read it yourself, you can go to the U.S. House of Representatives website at:

[http://fsba.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Murray\\_Privatization-Caucus-Memo.pdf](http://fsba.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Murray_Privatization-Caucus-Memo.pdf)

The bill repeals the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965, limiting the power of the Department of Education to fund LEAs (Lead Education Agency) through any mechanism other than block grants to states. This means that states would have to compete for the funds through a grant process. The bill establishes an education voucher program requiring each LEA to distribute a portion of funds to parents who elect to enroll their child in a private school or to home-school their child, and to be sure the payments will be used for appropriate educational expenses. In order for a state to qualify for these block grants, state law has to allow these choice options which Florida does. Many of these options are already available in Florida. This is a federal initiative to promote competition in education, under the theory that competition promotes excellence. The nutrition piece of the legislation repeals some of the nutritional requirements that promoted the addition of more fruits and vegetables. (Sometimes items get attached to a bill as a vehicle for passage.)

First, federal funds are a small, but important, part of our budget in Escambia County. Presently, the funds are distributed to schools with large numbers of students in poverty (Title I), and to students who have disabilities (Individuals with Disability Education Act) to enhance services for these students. Presently, these federal funds are shared with private institutions if they have students that qualify. As involved leaders in public education, you need to evaluate how you believe education should be delivered. Is it the role of the federal government to provide a free, quality public education for ALL children, holding all institutions accountable for funding received? If parents choose not to enroll their children in the free system, should they receive funds for that education? Should these funds be used to create a better quality free system? Would compensating teachers better bring additional quality into the classroom? Is it really a choice program if there are criteria for enrollment? Is it really a choice if no transportation is provided? Changes in education will be proposed at the state and federal level as we all work to provide high quality education to all students. This will be an ongoing conversation. Stay vigilant. Sign up for alerts from FLPTA and from National PTA. Go to the Florida House and the Florida Senate websites and sign up to track specific bills. Educate yourself. Plan to attend Representative Matt Gaetz town hall later this month or email your concerns and comments to him anytime.

Remember all elected officials work for you. We serve at your pleasure. Be sure to make us accountable. This is just the beginning of the process. There will be committee reviews and amendments proposed. Respond to the alerts sent out by PTA so that our representatives hear from you. Please do not hesitate to call or email me if you have additional concerns or questions.

### *A Message from your County Council*



This newsletter is brought to you by the hundreds of requests we have received regarding all that you may have been hearing about on social media. The HR 610 conversation is a very important one. Although, we are told that the bill will not go anywhere this year it is important that parents (as well as the community) have an opportunity to receive an informed response AS WELL AS know where your own elected officials stand.

We hope this newsletter supplies you with a better understanding of the bill as well as allows you to understand where your leadership stands.

Feel free to contact me with any further questions. For convenience, this information will also be posted on our website.

Michelle Salzman, President

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### WHAT DO OUR ELECTED OFFICIALS SAY ABOUT THIS BILL?

#### CONGRESSMAN MATT GAETZ ON H.R. 610:

Maintaining the status quo is simple — just keep doing something the same way it's been done. It may not be the most efficient way to do something, or the most effective, but it's familiar. It's easy. Most importantly, it's safe — maintaining the status quo means it's not our fault when something goes wrong. "Sorry; that's just the way things are done around here." Translation: "don't blame me, blame the system!"

Change, on the other hand, is hard. Something new is something unknown, and it's easy to feel doubt in the face of the unknown. People ask "What if it's not as good as what we had before?", but that's fear talking. We mustn't forget to ask "What if it's better?"

I've seen a lot of concerned posts on social media, op-eds, and articles about H.R. 610. People have said that it worries them. But the question is, are they worried because of what the bill says? Or are they worried about it because it's bold and new and different? I think that most of the agitated hand-wringing is because of the latter.

There's no doubt about it: H.R. 610 **would** be a big change for education in our country. This bill re-envisioned the role of the Department of Education in our students' academic development. Instead of having children's education micromanaged by the Department of Education's Washington bureaucrats — who want to control everything from school curricula to standardized tests to students' lunch choices — H.R. 610 would sharply reduce the power of the Department of Education, and limit their power to funding individual states. This state-appropriated money (distributed in the form of block grants) will then be used for public schools, and will also be distributed to families in the form of vouchers, allowing them to pick different school options, such as charter schools or home schools.

For the past four decades, American public education has stagnated. The amount we spend on each student grows every year, but students' math skills have not improved, their reading comprehension has not improved, and their test scores have stayed flat. Members of Congress on both sides of the aisle agree. But what only a few seem willing to notice is that the stagnation in education corresponds directly with the increased power and authority given to the Department of Education, which was elevated to a Cabinet-level department in 1979. Imagine a bunch of bright-eyed elementary school students in a classroom in Escambia County. Who do **you** think has better insight into what these students need: the teacher who's standing in front of them? Or a bureaucrat in Washington, DC, who's convinced that a seven-year-old thrills to the idea of soggy quinoa and multi-grain cardboard bread? Now think on a broader level: who has determined why those children are in that classroom? Did parents get to choose the school, because they thought it would be a good fit for their child? If so, that's great. More power to them. But maybe that choice was forced upon them — in which case, it's no choice at all. Maybe a charter school would be a better fit; maybe they'd prefer to homeschool their child. These are all valid options — but the Department of Education has made picking these options difficult, especially for families with limited financial resources. For families who want to pick a different school for their children, vouchers will be a godsend, and will help families make better, more informed choices, based on what they want and need for their children.

H.R. 610 is something new, but that shouldn't be cause for alarm. I support H.R. 610, because it will give residents of northwest Florida more school choice, and because it takes power out of Washington. When it comes to what Florida students need, Florida teachers know better than Washington bureaucrats. That's why we need to support our students, parents, and educators by taking this bold step forward. After all, we can't achieve big goals without having big dreams and big ideas. The future belongs to the children of our nation — we must do everything we can to help them achieve their limitless potential.

#### WANT MORE INFORMATION?



LINKS:

[http://fsba.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Murray\\_Privatization-Caucus-Memo.pdf](http://fsba.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Murray_Privatization-Caucus-Memo.pdf)

[Fsba.org/advocacy](http://Fsba.org/advocacy)

[PTA.org/advocacy](http://PTA.org/advocacy)

FADSS.org (Florida Association of District School Superintendents)

[Escambiapta.org](http://Escambiapta.org)

#### SUPERINTENDENT, MALCOLM THOMAS



"HB 610 is overly broad with the distribution of federal dollars as vouchers. Currently, the legislation has no Senate companion. Vouchers should not be expanded without making sure that accountability measures similar to traditional public schools are included. Any student receiving tax payer funds should be measured with state assessments and results reported to the parent.

Any institution receiving tax payer funds should be required to participate in the state accountability for school grades."