

The Coalition of McKay Scholarship Schools

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The Coalition's Position on Accountability

The Coalition of McKay Scholarship Schools is a not for profit Florida corporation with a volunteer, elected board of directors. It was established December 2002 and has the mission to assimilate and disseminate information about the McKay Scholarship program from sources such as the Department of Education, the legislature, schools, parents, and the community. The Coalition also advocates for McKay Scholarship schools and students with disabilities to ensure the viability of this program.

The Coalition has hosted four statewide conference of schools participating in the McKay program where DOE, legislative and schools could share concerns and discuss issues. The Coalition has sent FYI Email alerts concerning the Compliance Form, Re-evaluation, Legislative issues and other items to assist schools that participate in the McKay Scholarship Program.

To carry out the advocacy part of The Coalition's mission, board members worked with DOE officials to develop the Compliance Form, discussed changes needed in the McKay Statute with the Senate Task Force Committee and the Senate Education Committee, assisted in the crafting of accountability legislation, and continue to work in all of these areas to insure that the McKay Scholarship Program remains a viable program.

Through the passage of The Scholarship Accountability Statute and revisions of The McKay Scholarship Statute during the 2006 Legislative Session, the Legislature has provided many more accountability measures for both the Department of Education and the participating private schools. FLDOE has addressed most of the issues that were raised by The Florida Senate Education Staff Committee's Interim Project Report 2004-130 which indicated that the major weakness of the McKay Scholarship Program has been the State Board of Education's lack of management and oversight of the program.

FL DOE has established the Annual Notarized Compliance Form for participating schools; developed a tighter attendance verification procedure, cross checking with public school attendance; required State and Federal Fingerprinting for staff with direct contact with students; set-up a hot line for complaints and systems for investigating them; instituted more fiscal responsibility; and directed guidelines for reporting of student progress.

The Public-Private Partnership between DOE and the Private Sector is beginning to work more effectively. DOE and the Private Sector have established better lines of communication; built a strong web based system for circulating information; established a system to verify compliance documents every three years; engaged in a monthly, statewide conference call; developed Rules approved by the Board of Regents December 2006.

These changes have established a system which is truly accountable and serves the needs of children with disabilities effectively.

Since The Coalition's founding in 2002, we have supported accountability. Many of the issues listed below have now become part of the McKay Scholarship Statute. The Coalition was a partner in the legislative process to place these measures into law.

The Coalition supports Fiscal Accountability:

Demonstrate fiscal soundness by being in operation for 3 years, or

Obtain a surety bond or letter of credit for the amount equal to the scholarship funds for any quarter (for schools in operation less than 3 years)

Improve oversight by FLDOE in terms of attendance verification for scholarship distribution

The Coalition supports Safety Accountability:

Comply with all state and local health and safety laws and codes as well as all laws relating to general regulation of private schools prior to being allowed to participate in the program

Conduct mandatory level 2 background fingerprint screening for all employees who have unsupervised direct contact with scholarship students in the private schools. Results of the screening shall be provided to the participating private schools.

The Coalition supports Accountability to the Parent and Child:

Publish information by the school concerning the services provided, the credentials and training of the staff explained, and an evaluation plan described

Schedule meetings with parents to discuss the child's progress.

Provide evaluations, both objective and subjective, that are appropriate to the child and their disability.

Establish processes where parents or others may notify FLDOE of any violation by a private or public school relating to the McKay Scholarship Program

Establish processes by the FLDOE whereby the parents can obtain information concerning private schools enrolled in the program, as well as information on the McKay Scholarship Program,

Establish processes by the FLDOE whereby the parent can give an evaluation of the private or public school in which they have enrolled.

The Coalition Supports Teacher Criteria:

The original statute provides for "teachers who hold baccalaureate or high degrees, or have at least 3 years of teaching experience in public or private schools, or have special skills, knowledge, or expertise that qualifies them to provide instruction in subjects taught." We continue to support this part of the statute. While an examination of McKay schools have shown that, predominately, their teachers hold a baccalaureate or higher degree, room is left for innovative practices such as hiring individuals with AS degrees in computer fields to be the computer teachers, and/or in hiring individuals with health related training to assist in some of the programs with the medically needed.

Our stand continues to be INFORMED PARENTS. Schools should explain the qualifications of their teachers and let the parents make the choice.

The Coalition Supports Private School Autonomy and Parent Choice:

The strength of the private school sector is in its ability to develop diverse programs which meets the needs of its students. This is not a one size fits all model. A rural county may require different programming than an urban county; a school for autistic requires different choices than a school for the developmentally disabled; a parochial school may have a very different philosophy than a secular school. The McKay Program was designed so that a parent would have a diverse field from which to choose the best program for their child. **We support regulation that will allow this autonomy to remain in the hands of the private school and of the private school consumer.**

The Coalition feels that there is much more right to the current McKay Statute than is wrong. However, certain groups and legislators have sought to place false accountability measures on the McKay Scholarship Program. These measures would force the McKay Program into a “One Shoe Fits All” mode instead of allowing for the diversity of programming which is essential for parents of children with disabilities.

The Coalition does not support Accreditation:

It has been suggested that in order to participate in scholarship programs, schools would have to be accredited by certain accrediting agencies. This requirement would not achieve the goal of ensuring fiscal or academic accountability.

Accreditation does not ensure quality academic outcomes. Only 36% of public schools are accredited. Sixty-four percent of F or Double F Florida schools in 2005 were accredited and they were not in danger of losing their accreditation. If private schools must be accredited to accept students, will all public schools face the same requirement?

Many innovated schools serving McKay scholarship students could not be accredited due to certain technical requirements, such as having a library with a certain number of books, or recreational facilities of a certain type. Roughly one third of McKay students attend unaccredited schools. These students would be forced out of the schools chosen by their parents.

According to DOE, there has never been a complaint by any parent in reference to whether a private school is accredited or not. Who is asking for accreditation as a requirement? Even the major accrediting agencies have not been asking that schools be required to be accredited. Is this not just another bureaucratic stumbling block being proposed by opponents of parental choice?

The Coalition does not support unilateral nationally normed testing:

From an earlier survey of our Coalition members, the majority of schools perform nationally normed testing.

Our concern with this being a unilateral requirement is that nationally normed testing for some of our students, due to their disabilities (autism, developmentally disabled) is totally inappropriate. We support evaluations appropriate to the disability.

Our second concern covers who determines the “nationally normed test” and which tests will be acceptable. Private schools have chosen nationally normed tests based on their philosophy and curriculum. The possibility of taking that choice away, infringes on the private school’s autonomy and understanding of its own needs and mission. Financially, the cost of changing to a new test would be an unnecessary burden for private schools to bear.

The Coalition does not support forced training:

A suggested amendment to the statute was the requirement that McKay Scholarship schools send their teachers to two FLDOE sponsored ESE workshops each year. The Coalition is in favor of training for all teachers, however, the autonomy to train in the area of disability and in the manner in which the private schools deem appropriate to use their mission should not be taken away from the private school.

When this requirement was brought forward to some McKay parents, their response was, "I left the public school trained teachers in search of something else. Why would I want my private school to be trained by the same people?"

Finally, the financial burden this would place upon both the state to train staffs of over 700 schools and upon the private school would be horrific.

The Coalition does not support in-field teaching:

We support trained teachers, but the requirement of "in-field" would have far reaching implications which would make it impossible for most private schools to take the McKay Scholarship.

If the requirement is for only a 4-year baccalaureate degree, but in-field teaching is required, what "field" would we look to for an elementary teacher? The only in-field person qualified would be an elementary certified teacher. Already a vast shortage of certified teachers exist in the public schools, private schools could not compete with the public school and its resources in terms of salary and benefits. What "certification" will qualify? State? Self certifying groups?

In the private sector many of our teachers "cross teach subjects". A history teacher may also teach literature. Most private schools do not have the financial luxury of hiring only "in-field" and sometimes the cross training actually creates a better teacher.

The public school does not have this requirement and/or has many exceptions to it as many teachers, especially in ESE programs, are not certified in-field.

In Conclusion:

The Coalition of McKay Scholarship Schools is dedicated to providing to parents of children with disabilities a diverse arena from which parents may choose the program that they feel best fits their children's needs. We are supportive of legislation which allows for the autonomy of the private school while providing for fiscal responsibility and parent accountability.

The Coalition of McKay Scholarship Schools is an organization of non-public schools that accepts students receiving funding through the McKay Scholarship program and individuals who are committed to keeping the McKay Scholarship Program a viable choice for parents of students with disabilities in Florida. The Coalition's mission is to assimilate and disseminate information about the McKay Scholarship program from sources such as the Department of Education (DOE), the legislature, schools, parents, and the community. The Coalition also advocated for McKay Scholarship schools and students with disabilities to ensure viability of this program