

Backpack Full of Cash

by, Andrea Walker, 850 723-2112

Paula Montgomery organized a screening of the documentary *Backpack Full of Cash* at Washington High School Tuesday, September 24. The premise of the film is to expose how the privatization of education in the United States is diminishing the public-school system. Charter schools and the use of vouchers take the per pupil spending away from the public schools.

The film cited several examples including Philadelphia, New Orleans, and Union City, New Jersey. Beginning with the decline of the school system in Philadelphia, the film showed the dire straits the Philadelphia School System descended into as funding was cut year after year. The worst case featured was the high school with only two counselors for over 1200 students, no librarian, no music, arts, or football, and only one custodian for a four-story building. In the meantime, the String Theory Charter School was building state of the art schools with money being diverted from public schools.

The second example occurred after Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, when investors saw a way to rebuild the entire school system and did so, effectively closing the public schools, financed in part by the Walton family, heirs of Sam Walton.

When students transfer from public to charter schools, their per pupil funding goes with them. The average per pupil spending in the U.S. is over \$11,000 per student per year. Hence, the term “backpack full of cash,” tax payer money is used for private enterprise. It was originally believed that charter schools, run like a business, would provide a better education and give parents who could not afford private schools a choice and a way to level the playing field.

In places like Philadelphia, however, the system became corrupted in several ways. Charter schools were able to indiscriminately choose their students by methods such as requiring expensive unaffordable uniforms and by not providing transportation from undesirable/low income areas.

In contrast, leaders in Union City, NJ, determined to take back their public education system. Educators came up with rigorous and engaging curriculum, combined with high expectations to increase the quality of education there.

The consensus of the experts interviewed in the film is that, contrary to public opinion, public schools are not failing as we are led to believe. Test scores and graduation rates are actually increasing. Research shows that charter schools are not performing as well as we are led to believe either. Some studies show little difference between the two sectors. Diane Ravitch, former Assistant Secretary of Education, has studied and written extensively on public education and changed her viewpoint from a believer in school reform and supporter of charter schools to one of adamant opposition, saying “Reform should mean improvement.” The argument was made that too much testing steals the creativity of the student.

The film also showed the contradictory situation of private religious schools receiving taxpayer funding through vouchers. In this situation, the religious schools receive no supervision and offer no accountability. The examples showed questionable curricula as well as dubious hiring practices and qualifications for teachers.

Another seemingly farcical situation is the cyber school. The entire product looked bad, from isolating the student socially as well as isolating the student from a hands-on sensory learning environment. For example, the student was shown a 3D illustration of the anatomy of a frog as opposed to physically dissecting the frog. Most implausible was the physical education course which relied on the honor system

as the student answers questions on the computer about her physical activity on any given day, then “gets an A.”

In summary, “Public schools are about citizenship.”

After the film, retired educator and former Washington High School Principal Eugene Pettis moderated a panel discussion. The panel consisted of local and state education experts: Cathy Boehm, Legislative Specialist, Florida Educator Association; Patty Hightower, Escambia County School Board, District 4; Frederick Ingram, Vice President, Florida Education Association; Vicki Mathis, Director, Alternative Education, Escambia District Schools; and Diane Scott, President, Santa Rosa County School Board.

Patty Hightower agrees the film reinforces what we know about the disparity in funding between the public and charter school systems. To increase awareness, she recommends the report “Hidden Costs of Charter School Choice: Privatizing Public Education in Florida” on the web site www.integrityflorida.org. “The hope expressed in this report is to help the legislators understand; reform needs to be an improvement.”

Frederick Ingram stated the situation in Miami is similar to Philadelphia in that over 100 charter schools exist in Miami. He said the charter school movement started with the union movement but grew out of control. “Schools of education are now the business of education and the politics of education. Corporate education reforms started in Florida, but the goals change every year. Kids are hurt, and we need to get back to what students and teachers want and need. There is too much testing and not enough supplies. Public education is the cornerstone of democracy, and the public-school system takes all kids. Charter schools are now a competition for public education.” All work has dignity. We should be preparing our students with life skills and vocations as well as for college.

Diane Scott cautions that people don’t know, and there is a fight to educate people. Decisions are made at the state level. Concerned citizens should write letters and contact school board members as well as legislators. The eroding budget is not seen as a problem by the legislators. They believe public schools are failing and that charter schools are the answer, so it will take a concerted effort to turn that message around. The number of people going into teacher education programs is decreasing. Amendment 8 issues (giving state complete control over charter schools) are not dead, and effort to remove accountability from public schools systems and given to the state will probably surface later, buried in a bill elsewhere.

Cathy Boehme quoted numbers from the Education Enterprise in the U.S. The K – College budget is \$1.254 trillion. The K – 12 is \$667 billion, but those dollars are not going into schools. We are spending tremendous amounts of money for education consultants, other programs, and other areas to supplement what we do in schools. For example, one “failing school” was recently required to spend \$600,000 for a “turnaround consult.” Florida Representative Dave Simmons of Orlando provided additional funding for community schools, and Escambia County was one of those recipients. That \$1.2 – 1.4 million turned a vast majority of schools around, and our schools have been rated C schools which will keep them from closing for now. Statewide, of 100,000 students who receive vouchers, there is no regulation. Of 1,733 schools, only 340 are required to report test scores, and they choose something other than FSA. Of those, 117 recently reported significant decline in scores over two years; only 46 reported gains in student learning. We are spending tax dollars to send children to these schools with no evidence they are gaining. She reminds us the November election will determine the future, and even though Amendment 8 is off the ballot, the issues are not dead. McKay scholarships, vouchers used by ESE students to attend private schools, allow parents of students with disabilities to choose best academic situation for their child. However, the schools are not required to provide the special services the student needs. Vouchers sign

away rights to IEPs and services. The November election will determine which way legislation goes to either counteract the unbalanced funding of HB 7069 and 7055 or provide universal vouchers, which is the endgame.

According to Vickie Mathis, locally we have five charter schools that are successful, but several charters have closed due to mismanagement. The downfall is the for-profit charter management companies. We cannot be in education to make money. We have seen charter schools also target a specific population by not providing transportation. Legislation says charter schools are public schools and requires charter school students to take state tests, but private school students are not required. Private and religious schools receive vouchers, public money which should remain in public schools. Escambia County charter schools have certified teachers. Private schools are not monitored. In Escambia County, career academies in the middle and high schools are doing a good job.

In closing, Pettis stressed voucher schools have no regulation, but we can do something by contacting legislature. When constituents make points, legislators listen. Charter schools are another way to desegregate schools, reiterating the comment “reform is not always improvement,” and adding, “reform should be data driven.” Politics drive education.

Malcolm Thomas concluded the program with the following points:

- The problem in Florida is not charter schools. Charter schools are held accountable. The problem in Florida is corporate vouchers. Students at voucher schools don't have to take tests; the teachers don't have to be certified.
- The budget increase this year for public schools was 47 cents per student, about \$10 per classroom. That does not allow for raises for teachers or even pay the light bill.
- Escambia County has 65 career academies, with clusters in every middle and high school. The academies introduce vocational training as students decide what they want to do. We believe everyone wants to work.
- George Stone is FAA certified, the only regional trainer in aircraft maintenance.

Resources for additional information:

- www.backpackfullofcash.com
- *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools* (2013) [ISBN 978-0385350884](https://www.amazon.com/dp/9780385350884) by Diane Ravitch who has published numerous books and more than 500 articles in scholarly and popular journals.
- www.integrityflorida.org
- **CS/HB 7069: Education**
- **CS/HB 7055: Education**
- <http://www.fldoe.org/schools/school-choice/k-12-scholarship-programs/mckay/>