

ADE DAILY NEWS CLIPS

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Questions for Jeb Bush on charter schools (Arkansas Times)

When former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush joins the Arkansas Billionaire Boys Club Tuesday for a rally at the Arkansas capitol to promote their charter school expansion agenda, somebody might ask Bush what he thinks of Stanley Smith.

Smith is a Florida college professor not yet on the Walton family charter school endorsement payroll.

Recently, he published an assessment of the booming charter school movement in Florida.

The average charter school is doing about the same as the non-charter school when no adjustments are made for poverty and minority statuses. When the adjusted scores are considered, the average charter school performs significantly worse than the average non-charter school.

... "Although charter schools may be cheaper for the state to fund, the adjusted scores suggest that Florida is also getting a lower return on these schools," Smith said. "Is the lower average return on these schools worth the lower cost?"

Earlier studies in Florida showed that charter schools were more likely to post flunking grades than public schools on tests.

The Florida education department, which shills for charter schools, has developed some countering arguments. But giving them even that benefit of the doubt, you have yet another state that proves the larger national story. There are some excellent charter schools. There are some stinkers. On average, these quasi-public schools, often operated for profit and always without significant state oversight or elected school boards, don't do any better than real public schools.

Pastor's school visits off for now (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

CONWAY — The Conway School District's board hopes to hear a report next month from a Texas organization representing the district in a complaint filed about a church pastor who until recently visited with students during lunch.

In a Jan. 18 e-mail to board members, Superintendent Greg Murry wrote that Jeff Mateer, a lawyer with the Liberty Institute, tentatively plans to attend the board's Feb. 12 meeting "and present to us his opinion in person."

The Liberty Institute — which describes itself as "a nonprofit legal group dedicated to restoring and defending religious liberty across America" — is representing the district at no charge, Mateer said.

In late October, the Wisconsin-based Freedom From Religion Foundation wrote Murry to say it had “received reports that a pastor from New Life Church of Conway had been given access to students at Carl Stuart Middle School during school hours.”

“We understand the pastor is permitted into the school cafeteria during the students’ lunch time to talk with students,” the letter signed by staff attorney Patrick Elliott added.

The foundation — which describes itself as working for those “committed to the cherished principle of separation of state and church” — asked that the school system “immediately discontinue allowing any pastor access to students during school hours” at Carl Stuart and any other district schools.

Murry, in his e-mail to board members, wrote that Mateer’s “opinion is that we are clearly within the constitution to allow these pastors in.”

Murry’s e-mails were among many released under the Arkansas Freedom of Information Act.

Mateer shared a similar view in a telephone interview from his Dallas office Friday but also said the school district cannot turn away any religious group or any atheist group if it allows one such group in — as long as they follow the same procedures outlined by the school.

Mateer said he believes that the law allows for “what we call an ‘all-comers policy,’” which “doesn’t discriminate on the basis of religion or nonreligion.”

Murry has stopped the visits by religious groups’ representatives, pending the Liberty Institute’s investigation.

In a Jan. 17 e-mail to board members about his meeting earlier that day with 20 youth pastors, Murry said he told them “that we are looking to find a way to write a legally defensible policy that would allow them to come on campus [again] during lunch.”

Murry referred all questions to the Liberty Institute.

But in an e-mailed statement released by the institute, Murry said, “The District respects the religious liberty of all students and citizens and will work diligently to follow the Constitution and take the appropriate steps necessary to investigate this issue further and follow the law.”

Mateer said New Life is not the only religious group that has been visiting the school, even though it is the only one specifically cited by the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

“Up to 20 from various” religious groups had been visiting with students who are affiliated with their churches and who attend the district’s middle schools, junior high school and high school, Mateer said.

“I’m not aware of any non-Christians” or atheists asking to visit with students at the schools, Mateer said.

If a Jewish person from an area synagogue wanted to visit with students as well, “he would not be prohibited.” Nor, he said, could the district legally preclude members of other, less mainstream religions such as Scientologists.

“You couldn’t say everyone can come” except the atheist, Mateer said.

The school must apply the same policy to all such groups, he said.

Asked how the school could prevent a child from visiting with a religious group other than the one of the parents' choice, Mateer said, "We're going to look at that policy."

The school district also has been allowing representatives of nonreligious groups to visit with students.

Examples, Mateer said, would be people mentoring children and military recruiters. He noted that the district cannot deny access to the recruiters under federal law.

Education rally set at Capitol rotunda (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

LITTLE ROCK — Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush and Jim Walton, the chairman and chief executive officer of Arvest Bank Group Inc., will be the featured speakers at an education rally at 9:15 a.m. Tuesday in the rotunda of the state Capitol building.

Bush was governor of Florida from 1999 to 2007. He is chairman of the Foundation for Excellence in Education.

The rally, to be held in conjunction with National School Choice Week, is being organized by A+ Arkansas. The group also is hosting what is titled an Education Summit at 11:30 a.m., after the rally, at the DoubleTree Hotel in Little Rock.

A+ Arkansas is a coalition of parents, educators and community leaders seeking to increase accountability in schools and improve opportunities for Arkansas' youth.

The meeting at the Double-Tree Hotel includes lunch and panel discussions by teachers, administrators, business leaders, educational experts and policymakers.

Patrick Wolf, professor and 21st Century Endowed Chair in School Choice in the department of education reform at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville's College of Education and Health Professions, will discuss Arkansas education issues with conference participants.

Fourteen speakers are listed for the event. They include Walter E. Hussman Jr., publisher of the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette and chief executive officer of the newspaper's parent company, WEHCO Media Inc.; William Dillard II, chief executive officer of Dillard's Inc.; John Bacon, chief executive officer of eStem Public Charter Schools; Michele Linch, executive director of the Arkansas State Teachers Association; and Jim Cooper, chairman of the Arkansas Board of Education;

Others are Leslie Hiner, vice president of programs and state relations at Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice; state Reps. Mark Biviano and James McLean; state Sen. Johnny Key; Georgia state Rep. Alisha Morgan; T. Willard Fair, chief executive officer of the Urban League of Greater Miami Inc.; Angela Shirey, Teach For America director of development; Virginia Walden Ford, executive director of the Arkansas Parent Network; and Luke Gordy, executive director of the Arkansas for Education Reform Foundation.

Requests to attend the conference luncheon can be sent by e-mail to info@aplusarkansas.org. More information about A+ Arkansas is available at AplusArkansas.org.
