

Amendment 2 may mean you pay Highlands Latin to bully children



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If a constitutional amendment on the ballot in Kentucky in six weeks passes, your tax dollars could soon go toward sending kids to a school where former students say teachers bully kids and drive them to tears and self-harm.

Former students told Courier Journal reporters Josh Wood and Krista Johnson that Highlands Latin School also routinely discards kids who fall behind in class or have minor behavioral issues, and forces them to leave because they're just not good enough.

They said failures in the classroom sometimes meant the teachers there would chastise them for disappointing God, which is one of the worst things you could tell a child reared in the conservative Christian world where the school recruits its students.

One woman said she was devastated as a teen after she was castigated by her principal for using a curse word in a poem when the principal told her she "used to be beautiful."

The school, a for-profit company, didn't respond to attempts to reach administrators by Wood and Johnson, nor did Martin Cothran, one of the school's founders and the founder of Memoria Press, which prints books used at the school and developed the school's curricula.

It may be the first time Cothran has refused to weigh in on an issue. He's the longtime spokesman for the Family Foundation of Kentucky, a right-wing think tank that favors spending taxpayer dollars on private and religious schools.

The Family Foundation supports the constitutional amendment, posting on its website, "On November 5, 2024, Kentuckians will have an opportunity to vote Yes on Amendment 2 to update the Kentucky Constitution to allow for more educational opportunities for families, students, and teachers."

The kind of bullying Highlands Latin teachers are accused of wouldn't fly in public schools, where teachers and administrators are accountable to elected school boards and, by extension, the voters.

And the selectivity that allows Highlands Latin to expel students for minor infractions and sagging grades also wouldn't happen in public schools, where state law requires all students to be educated.

'School choice' laws give tax dollars to private schools like Highlands Latin

Currently, state law doesn't allow state funds to be spent on private schools, which has roiled efforts by Republicans to institute "school choice" laws that would redirect educational funding that currently goes to public schools to private and religious schools.

And while the constitutional amendment wouldn't immediately divert the money away from public schools, it opens the door for that to happen as soon as the legislature meets again in January.

Republicans in Kentucky have long pushed for laws that would, instead of funding schools, allow money to follow a student — whether that student goes to a public school or a private school.

How that would work and whether the entire amount spent on each Kentucky student would follow them to their new school isn't clear. According to the Kentucky Education Department's website, on average \$18,522 in local, state and federal money is spent on each pupil in public schools.

Whatever, schools like Highlands Latin could stand to make a windfall if the legislature passes laws that would allow the state to pay all or part of a student's tuition. Highlands Latin charges tuition of between \$2,990 and \$9,300, depending on grade level.

Sounds like a bargain if you want your kids to be bullied and humiliated.

I tried to call Cothran to ask if he stands to make money through Memoria Press if the amendment passes and legislators approve a plan to redirect state education money to schools like Highland Latin.

His voice mail was full and he didn't immediately respond to a text message asking him to call back.

Private schools have no accountability

A bigger problem than who makes money, though, is the fact that there are no controls and no accountability over private schools that may one day receive taxpayer money to educate students.

There are no rules that would prohibit teachers from saying mean things to students, and there are no rules that would prohibit schools from kicking out kids with minor behavioral issues and giving up on students who struggle in classes.

And then, there are the curricula schools use and the textbooks they rely on.

Highlands Latin School uses antiquated textbooks, some of which were written more than 100 years ago, that have had the most racist parts edited out — including the removal of words like "savages" to describe Native Americans — but still belie some Confederate sympathies in at least one history book.

One such book, written in 1899, says that in the American South, the "climate there was so warm, and often so moist, that it was thought only African Americans could thrive as laborers. The planters, therefore, bought many slaves to cultivate their rice, cotton, indigo, sugar and tobacco plantations."

It never makes it clear that the real problem was the white men in the South were just too lazy to do the work themselves and would rather use cruelty to force Black slaves to do it.

At one point in that book, it says, "Many people in the South also thought slavery an evil, but they also thought that their slaves were so ignorant and helpless that they had to be treated like children for they would starve if left to themselves."

It allows hogwash like that to go unchallenged.

Some conservative religious schools in Louisville use textbooks that make outlandish claims that dinosaurs and humans shared the earth together because that's what their religion and not science tells them.

Amendment 2 could open the door for these schools to be funded with your dollars, too.

If parents want their children to be bullied by teachers, taught with books that struggle to hide their white supremacy, or learn that dinosaurs and people were once contemporaries, they should pay for it themselves.

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