

[Back](#)

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BEYOND 'A-PLUS'

## Bush Offers Audacious School Plan Governor pushes for changes in teacher pay and another voucher program.

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TALLAHASSEE -- Blitzing into a final push for an educational legacy, Gov. Jeb Bush on Wednesday announced a sweeping push to change things as large as how teachers are paid and as small as the test date for FCAT science tests.

If fully approved, principals could get rewards, teachers in high-crime areas would get paid more and three failures of the FCAT reading test would get a student a ticket to a private school.

Bush, who will leave office because of term limits next year, dubbed the plan "A-plus-plus," marking it as an evolution from his original "A-plus" plan.

He acknowledged the grandiosity. "It's the Legislature's job to be cautious. It's the governor's job not to be (cautious) on things that are important," Bush said.

"My hope and prayer is to get to the point where the biggest challenge we face will be that we have a crisis because too many young people are getting a high school degree of value, and we have a real shortage of slots for them to go to our great universities."

Criticism focused on what Bush dubbed the "Reading Compact Scholarships," a plan to allow students who have failed the reading portion of the FCAT test three consecutive times to receive a state-paid voucher to a private school.

Most of the state's private schools are religion-based. An upcoming Florida Supreme Court ruling on the constitutionality of using state money for instruction at religious schools is expected this year.

Sen. Jim King, R-Jacksonville, questioned the wisdom of launching another voucher program when the constitutionality is still unclear.

"I fully concur with (Bush's) focus and with the effort," King said. "My first concern is that I don't want to do anything that jeopardizes everything judicially."

House Democratic Leader Chris Smith, D-Fort Lauderdale, criticized the plan for failing to require FCAT tests at the schools taking the taxpayer-funded vouchers. "If we're going to spend government money, we have to have some accountability."

Bush pooh-poohed criticism of the voucher plan.

"It's as American as apple pie to give people choices," he said.

King said his current push to require tighter oversight for "voucher schools" would likely extend to these new schools to ensure that "flimflam artists, charlatans and outright crooks" aren't taking taxpayer dollars.

King also said voucher students would have to take a standardized test, but not the FCAT, and that the schoolwide results would be made public.

Polk County School Superintendent Gail McKinzie said it's too early to say what effect the governor's idea might have locally.

"Obviously there would be students who would be affected by this," she said. "But to tell you how many, I just can't.

"I don't think it would be a mass exodus."

McKinzie said she was a little concerned Bush may assume that any private school would be better for the students.

"That may or may not be true," she said.

Carolyn Finch, director of Polk's Office of School Choice, said she too was concerned about the idea. She said she'd like to know what research is available that says a struggling student will automatically improve just by moving to private school.

"I think we have schools doing a very good job working with the students," she said. "But it takes time. I think I'd like to see the money we're going to spend on these vouchers sent to students' schools instead."

Other highlights of Bush's plan:

- The 10th-grade FCAT science test would be moved back one year to allow more instruction. And the FCAT itself would be given a bit later in the year for the same reason.
- Microsoft would work with the state to provide a greater sharing of information and material among teachers.
- Some teachers would be paid more: teachers in an area where there is a shortage, teachers in poor schools or in high-crime areas, and teachers taking on leadership duties such as mentoring.
- Principals of well-performing schools could get bonuses, and a data-sharing network among principals would be created.
- The state would attempt to determine which universities and colleges do the best job of graduating "the most effective" teachers.

Rep. Dennis Baxley, R-Ocala, chairman of the House Education Council, praised the effort to reward good principals. "Every single 'turnaround' school has one common ingredient: It's got the right leader," Baxley said of schools showing drastic improvement.

And Lakeland Republican Rep. John Stargel touted a companion effort that asks voters to reverse their 2002 vote to limit class sizes and allow that money to be spent on teachers' raises. Stargel compared the class size mandate to a family recipe of rice pudding that was ruined as too much orange peel was added.

"Some people believe that the only way to educate children is to put them in a small classroom," Stargel said. "That is not fact. We have too much of one ingredient. What we're trying to do is balance the ingredients."

By pushing for higher teacher pay, Bush has neutered much of the opposition from his traditional foes: Democrats and the Florida Education Association, the state's largest teachers' union.

"When (Bush) talks about bonuses for our teachers, it's very good," Smith said.

FEA President Andy Ford said earlier this week that the group was willing to water down the class-size amendment. Ford said teachers are leery of Bush's promise for higher pay, citing the recent failure to fund previous plans. And Ford invoked the public disdain for the lottery, which was looted by lawmakers despite promises to earmark all of the revenue for education.

"The one thing we have not tried is (to) provide districts with sufficient funds," Ford said.

Bush's plan continues his passionate offense against what he sees as a diseased past where poorer students were written off and allowed to earn worthless degrees in public schools.

"It took a generation of neglect -- maybe not direct neglect, but certainly subtle neglect that said some kids can learn and some kids can't -- to get where we are today," Bush said.

Smith said Bush's plan is of a piece with a larger scheme to try out Republican ideas in Florida first.

"It's typical Jeb," Smith said.

"We tend to do a lot of things to see if they will fly in Florida, then they can do it in Texas and other places. A large part of (Aplus-plus) is Florida being the weather balloon for the Republican agenda."

Ledger reporter Andrew Dunn contributed to this story.