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A look at Bradenton Herald Editorial Board endorsements

## Florida's shameful situation on charter schools

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Plaudits are raining down on Gov. Rick Scott over his new education agenda, unveiled just last week. One of his top priorities is the expansion of charter schools in the name of parental choice.

In light of the outrage over a scandalous payment to one Orange County principal of a failed charter school, Scott should order an investigation into the compensation packages awarded by for-profit companies to charter school employees to ensure taxpayer money is not enriching a few while public schools suffer. And the Legislature should take another look at the laws governing charters and the expenditure of public money.

The principal in question not only received a \$519,000 severance check, but she took home her \$305,000 annual salary for a grand total of \$824,000 during the 2010-2011 school year. The Orlando Sentinel also reported last week the school only spent \$366,000 on teacher salaries and instruction during that school year. Nothing can justify that imbalance, especially for the leader of a charter that failed.

Public school district superintendents don't even make that kind of unconscionable salary. School boards would face public rage for even proposing such pay.

In mid-October, the governor ordered a review of the compensation awarded to the 28 presidents in the state college system after trustees at one agreed to a \$1.2 million severance package with the school's departing chief. Charter schools deserve even sharper scrutiny.

But this is just one example of a twisted system that fails taxpayers miserably.

Charters are operated independently of school districts by public or private entities, including out-of-state corporations and for-profit companies. Education companies are gaining power in Tallahassee with a governor and Republican-dominated Legislature friendly to their cause.

Last week the Miami Herald reported that Charter Schools USA handed out in excess of \$205,000 in contributions to political organizations and candidates for this election, three times the amount the Fort Lauderdale-based company spent two years ago.

That money must come from the profits the company earns at taxpayer expense; in effect, the public is paying that political price so charter schools can leverage even greater profits from the Legislature.

The Herald reviewed campaign finance data and found charter school companies, school management firms and for-profit colleges spent more than \$1.8 million this election cycle, mostly to Republicans.

Taxpayers are footing the bill for the privatization of public education, just as egregious a situation as the exorbitant departure payment to one Orange County principal.

The next big battle will come next year as the charter-school lobby renews its effort to gain a share of the construction money that lawmakers allocate to public school districts. That bid failed this year.

The Orange County situation gets even more disturbing. The charter school, housed in concrete portables, lacked computers, a library or cafeteria service.

Almost 75 percent of the 180 students, most at-risk or underprivileged youth, failed the state reading test and 50 percent failed math. The school graduated only about 45 percent of its students in 2011.

Incredibly, the charter school's board cited the principal for "leadership" and "providing an excellent educational opportunity" to its students in awarding the \$509,000 severance package.

This is simply unscrupulous greed at the expense of children and taxpayers. Florida needs strong laws that make charter schools more accountable with limitations on salaries and contracts.

Governor, we implore you to take a hard look at the state's shift to charter schools. Extend your concern for state spending on college presidents' pay to charters.

None of the above passes the smell test.

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