



## Florida's "Schools of Hope" Aren't

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For many families in Lee County, public schools are at the center of our communities — places where neighbors gather, teachers dedicate their lives to students, and generations of children learn and grow. But now, Florida's controversial "Schools of Hope" legislation threatens to undermine that foundation by siphoning public resources into private operations, disrupting classrooms, and deepening inequality across our state.

### **A Program That Diverts, Doesn't Strengthen, Public Education**

Although the law was originally pitched as a way to support students in persistently low-performing schools, its modern incarnation has drifted far from that mission. Today's "Schools of Hope" allows charter operators- privately managed schools funded with public tax dollars- to co-locate inside existing public school buildings at no cost, even in schools that are not academically failing. School districts are required to provide transportation, custodial services, food service, utilities, maintenance, and technology support for the charter operation while the charter pays no rent.

In practical terms, this means that Lee County taxpayers will continue to fund the upkeep of our schools while subsidizing a private organization housed within those same buildings; essentially a taxpayer subsidy of a private enterprise. Districts receive only the faint benefit of counting the charter's enrolled students in capital outlay funding, which hardly compensates for the operational costs that the district must absorb.

### **Taxpayer Money Should Support Schools, Not Private Operators**

One of the core problems with "Schools of Hope" is financial: the program diverts state per-pupil funding away from traditional public schools and into privately managed charters while keeping the fixed costs of running the school on the district's books. When a student transfers into a charter co-located within a public school, the state funding for that student follows them, but the district still pays for utilities, custodial services, security, and transportation.

That's not merely a theoretical concern. In Lee County, the school district regularly faces financial uncertainties — including losses from duplicated enrollments tied to statewide voucher programs, which could exceed \$4 million in lost funding. Meanwhile, as more students cluster in charters or choose alternative pathways, the tax revenue supporting neighborhood schools shrinks.

This isn't efficient resource sharing; it's effectively using public dollars to subsidize private operations while the hard costs remain with taxpayers. The goal of any public

education policy should be to ensure every child receives a high-quality education, but this law helps some special interests at taxpayer expense.

### **Logistical Chaos for Principals and School Leaders**

Public school principals already wear many hats- instructional leaders, disciplinarians, community liaisons, safety coordinators, staff managers, and budget overseers. “Schools of Hope” adds another layer of complexity: some public schools will now have to host two separate schools under one roof, with potentially different schedules, rosters, calendars, and requirements, but with no additional funding or staff.

Administrators will be forced to coordinate shared spaces such as cafeterias, libraries, gyms, playgrounds, and even bus loops. How will lunch schedules align? Which school gets priority for the gym? Who schedules custodial services when one school finishes later and needs extended cleaning hours? These aren’t hypothetical problems; they are real logistical nightmares that waste precious administrative time and energy.

And the 20-day window given to school districts to respond to a charter’s letter of intent to co-locate leaves almost no room for meaningful community input or thoughtful planning. Districts must prove “material impracticability” to block a co-location; a high evidentiary standard that doesn’t consider fiscal strain or educational disruption.

### **Eroding Equality and Community Control**

Public education, by definition, is meant to be shared by all children, regardless of background. But “Schools of Hope” privileges privately managed entities with priority access to public facilities and funding streams while placing the burden of supporting them on public institutions. This dynamic erodes equality by steering public resources away from community schools that educate the majority of students, including those with special needs, English learners, and students from low-income households.

Broader state trends show Florida’s school choice policies, including vouchers and expanding charters, are contributing to declining enrollment in traditional public schools statewide, which puts further pressure on local funding and may lead to difficult budget decisions.

In Lee County specifically, the School District is one of the largest in America, educating more than 100,000 students with a diverse population where 70 % qualify for federal lunch programs. These children, teachers, and families deserve investment and support, not displacement or distraction from resources meant to keep our schools thriving.

### **Local Voices Matter, But They’re Shut Out**

This policy also sidelines local voices. School boards elected by our community are constitutionally tasked with operating and supervising public schools. Yet “Schools of Hope” significantly limits these boards’ authority by mandating standard state charter contracts and prioritizing co-location approvals with minimal local negotiation or oversight. Counties, including Lee, have argued that this infringes on local control and could conflict with the constitutional role of school boards.

Parents and community members, the ones most affected, deserve real input and transparency in decisions about their schools, not deadlines and mandates that reduce their role to reactive witnesses.

## **What Families Really Need**

What would real support for Lee County education look like? It would be:

- More funding for teacher salaries to attract and retain excellent educators.
- Smaller class sizes, not administrative fragmentation.
- Expanded academic support programs- especially literacy and STEM initiatives.
- Investments in school facilities, safety, arts, and counseling services.
- Strengthened partnerships between schools, parents, and communities- not forced co-location.

## **“Schools of Hope” Is Not the Answer**

While the name sounds inspirational, the reality of “Schools of Hope” is far from it. Instead of expanding opportunity for all students, the policy steers public dollars toward private operations, strains principals and educators, erodes community control, and chips away at the promise of public education.

Families in Lee County deserve better than a law that undermines our shared schools rather than lifting them up.

Public education is not just a system; it’s our community’s future. Let’s protect it, invest in it, and strengthen it- not surrender it.

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