

Florida Democratic candidate for governor alienates school choice moms

David Jolly seems determined to make Andrew Gillum's 2018 mistake

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Prognosticator Larry Sabato recently updated his crystal ball assessment of Florida's 2026 gubernatorial election, moving it from a "safe" Republican race to a "likely" GOP win. But if history is any guide, he may want to walk that one back.

Florida's presumptive Democratic nominee, David Jolly, seems determined to make the same mistake that Democrat Andrew Gillum made the last time Florida had an open seat for governor in 2018. Mr. Jolly seems determined to alienate "school choice moms."

Eight years ago, Gillum narrowly lost Florida's gubernatorial election because 100,000 African American "School Choice Moms" crossed over and voted GOP, giving Ron DeSantis his 40,000 vote margin of victory. These "school choice moms" rejected Mr. Gillum after he threatened to close down Florida's school choice programs as a favor to the public school union.

Amazingly, history is about to repeat itself. In a recent campaign appearance, Mr. Jolly signaled that he plans to go after Florida's highly popular school choice programs, saddling them with new requirements and restrictions.

He claims that Florida's K-12 scholarship programs have had largely negative effects. And his running mate, former U.S. Rep. Gwen Graham, has doubled down on the issue, arguing that school choice hurts public schools.

What makes the Jolly-Graham gambit so remarkable is that Florida's school choice population has increased dramatically since 2018. Today, more than 500,000 Florida students make use of K-12 scholarships (four times the number in 2018). Another 400,000 Florida students attend charter schools. And 53% of all Sunshine State students currently attend something other than their zoned public school.

So, school choice is the “new normal” in Florida. And the success of these programs is reflected in a wide, impressive array of key metrics – including parental satisfaction numbers, student achievement test scores and bang-for-buck calculations of Florida’s K-12 return on investment.

Against this backdrop, one might have hoped that Mr. Jolly would stage a “Sister Souljah” moment and publicly break from Florida’s leading public school union — which recently filed a lawsuit designed to shut down Florida’s scholarship programs and charter schools.

But Mr. Jolly has welcomed the union’s endorsement and echoed many union complaints about school choice programs. For example, he recently told an African-American church in Lakeland, Florida, that K-12 scholarships should not go to families in “White suburban communities” that previously gave up on the public school system. Apparently, Mr. Jolly believes these homeschoolers and private schoolers should have to pay twice for K-12 education — once for their own children, out of pocket, and a second time for everyone else’s children, via their taxes. But curiously, Mr. Jolly uses K-12 scholarship money to pay for his own two children to attend a private school. (This inconvenient fact conveniently escaped mention when Jolly railed against White suburbanites at that Lakeland African American church.) Rather than adopting such a clumsy and divisive stance, imagine what might have happened had Mr. Jolly urged union officials to quit blaming school choice families for problems facing today’s public schools.

A “high road” message calling for all Floridians to work together — regardless of schooling preference — would have surely appealed to many of the “school choice moms” Mr. Gillum lost eight years ago. And it might have positioned a victorious Mr. Jolly for higher office.

Indeed, many believe that Mr. Gillum would have been on the 2020 Democratic presidential ticket had he won Florida’s gubernatorial race in 2018.

Instead, it’s Deja vu all over again in Florida. If the Democrats are going to find a school choice champion to lead them to a brighter future, they’re going to need to look to some other state.

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