

Voter-approved funds for teachers' raises should include those at charter schools, too

January 29, 2019 / By Bernie Navarro

In November, Miami-Dade County voters overwhelmingly supported a ballot referendum that will raise our property taxes to fund pay increases for public school teachers. Voters' support speaks to the value that county residents place on education. It recognizes the teaching profession as a vital component of society and the importance it holds for our future. Undoubtedly, these pay increases are way overdue and will allow teachers to focus on their craft and worry less about their finances.

However, there is a class of teachers that will not be getting a pay increase. They will not be recognized for their value to our community and will likely continue to struggle to make ends meet. These equal, but lesser-paid teachers deliver the same curriculum, in comparable circumstances and to a similar student body that MDCPS teachers do. These teachers work at publicly funded charter schools and educate children whose parents want a different choice to what's offered by the district public schools to educate their child.

Simply put, these teachers deserve the same recognition and the same compensation commitment as their public-school peers.

The debate over charter schools always generates strong opinions. The reality is that as an educational option for the majority of school-age children whose parents cannot afford a private school education, it has succeeded. Today charter schools are a pillar of South Florida's educational ecosystem. More than 65,000 students attend charter schools, or roughly one out of every five school-age child, with comparable ratios for teaching professionals. Excluding charter school teachers from the wage increase pact would not only create a teacher class system — an equal but lesser teacher — but could potentially trickle down to the student level.

The unintended consequences of an unbalanced wage system has extended to higher learning institutions as well where many college professors find themselves earning less than their K-12 colleagues. Ultimately the referendum has created a class system that rewards one professional and excludes another in the same industry, no matter how deserving the original intent was.

We would all be wise to learn from the teacher strikes that have taken place throughout the United States, including in Arizona, Oklahoma and West Virginia and in Chicago and, most recently, Los Angeles.

Wages and benefits have been a central theme for most of them and, in some cases, have destabilized the education services offered. Also, given the cost of our housing market, many teachers who are not fairly compensated, likely will have to either leave South Florida or find better-paying jobs in other industries. This will exacerbate the teaching crisis in our community.

Perhaps providing accessible housing opportunities in lieu of a wage increase could bridge the wage divide, serving as a proactive model for the rest of the country.



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Miami Herald

It is ultimately for the benefit of our children and future generations that we invest in education. If we are to recommit to this righteous endeavor, we should do so comprehensively and support public school teachers, charter school teachers and professors in higher education, as well. I ask the State Legislature to treat all of teaching professionals equally and create a system of compensation that rewards all those who are committed to helping our most valuable resource — our children.

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