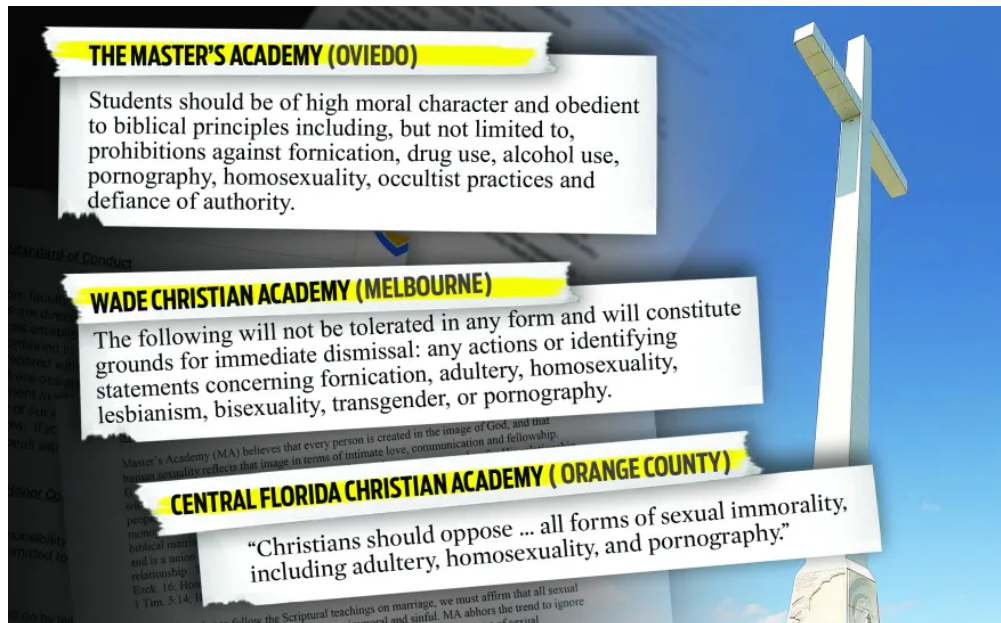


OPINION > OPINION COLUMNISTS

Maxwell: Anti-gay Christian schools are welcome in Florida. But Muslim ones?



Excerpts from student handbooks for private schools in Florida that say they refuse to serve gay students, even though they receive public funding through the state's voucher (or "scholarship") program.



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For nearly a decade, the Orlando Sentinel has documented and exposed factually flawed teaching and blatant discrimination at religious schools in Florida that are funded with tax dollars.

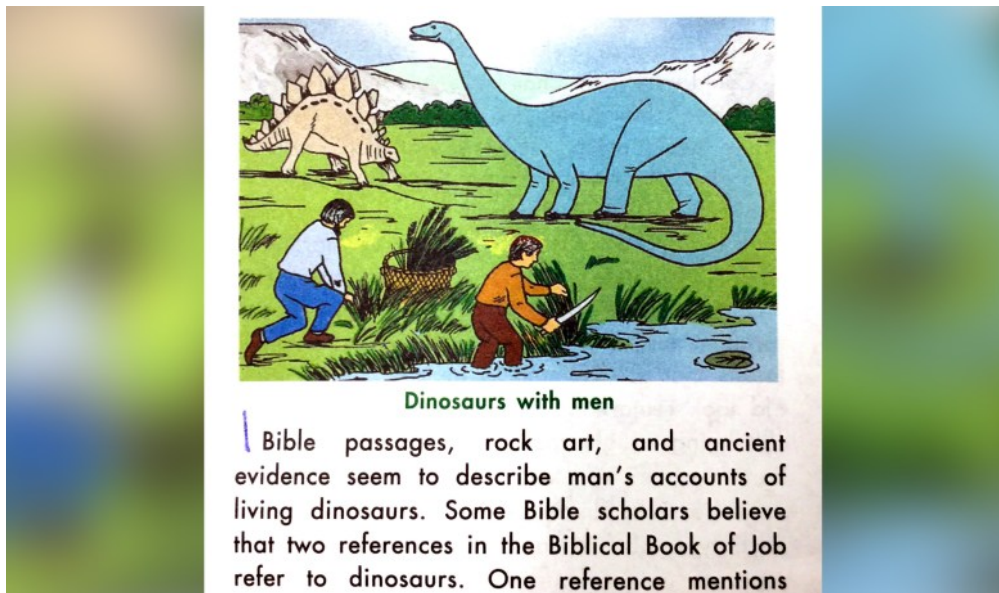
We found schools that refused to serve gay students, that fired teachers after learning they were gay and that even refused to serve kids if school officials learned that they have two same-sex parents — all in the name of religion.

We also documented schools that refused to serve children with disabilities — schools whose written policies said they wouldn't enroll kids in wheelchairs or with intellectual challenges, citing autism as an example.

And we found schools that teach all kinds of [factually inaccurate science and history lessons](#), using books that question evolution, human history and even the negative aspects of segregation.

Every time we exposed these twisted teachings or discriminatory policies, supporters of school choice — including the governor and a majority of GOP lawmakers — shrugged it off, saying that's how "choice" works. Schools should be free to teach whatever they want, they argued, and if parents don't like it, they should simply *choose* to take their kids to another school.

Well, that was apparently before some of these politicians learned that Muslims also get tax dollars to run voucher schools. Now they've decided that unfettered "choice" may have some drawbacks.



The Orlando Sentinel's "Schools without Rules" investigation found that taxpayer-funded vouchers pay for students in Florida to attend schools where teachers don't have degrees, have criminal records and use curriculum like this "biology" workbook that featured men in pants working alongside dinosaurs.

The most recent push to defund voucher schools that teach Islamic faith is being led by the hard-right members of the "Freedom Caucus" in Congress, which has counted [aspiring Florida governor Byron Donalds](#) among its members.

After learning that taxpayer-funded voucher money supported a Muslim-run school in Tennessee, the Freedom Caucus [tweeted](#) earlier this month that: "School choice is great, but taxpayer dollars should not be going to Islamic schools in Nashville (or anywhere in Tennessee) ..."

That was followed this week by Florida's GOP Attorney General, James Uthmeier, highlighting an Islamic voucher school in Florida that Uthmeier suggested should be investigated, [saying](#) "Sharia law seeks to destroy and supplant the pillars of our republican form of government and is incompatible with the Western tradition."

So to recap: If a school uses Christian faith to discriminate against gay students or kids in wheelchairs, that's all fine. That's what "choice" is all about. But if an Islamic school espouses objectionable ideas, we have a problem.

I've long argued that *no school* should get public money to spread religious indoctrination or to discriminate against any member of the tax-paying public — regardless of whether the school is run by Christians, Muslims or anyone else. That doesn't seem like a radical stance. Yet that approach to both quality and equality has been roundly rejected by school-choice proponents.

As a quick refresher, the Orlando Sentinel started documenting some of the ugly things going on inside Florida's publicly funded voucher schools back in 2017 in its ["Schools without Rules" series](#). Among the findings:

- Some "teachers" lacked degrees or any kind of basic teaching certification
- Finances so disastrous that some schools actually shut down in the middle of the school year, stranding families and students
- Science classes that claimed [dinosaurs roamed the earth with humans](#) and history lessons that claimed slavery and segregation weren't really all that bad
- Teachers [fired for being gay](#). And more than 150 voucher schools with written policies that explicitly said that LGBTQ students would not be admitted or that students who uttered phrases like "I am gay" would be expelled
- Schools that said they [wouldn't serve kids with special needs or disabilities](#), including one in Volusia that received more than \$1.5 million in public money a year while also having a written policy that said all of its students must be "ambulatory" and have "no emotional disorders or limited intellectual functions (such as Autism, Asperger's, Down's syndrome, etc.)."

Some of the schools, including that one in Volusia, would later change their policies or claim they'd never actually enforced them — but also made it clear that Florida lawmakers gave them permission to do as they please with public money. "Trinity Christian Academy is a religious organization and we are fully within our rights to freely practice our beliefs," the headmaster said in an email two years ago. "Our teaching is Bible-based and we will make no apology for that."

She was right. Florida's taxpayer-funded voucher system has long allowed schools to largely do as they please and do so unapologetically — until some Muslim schools caught their attention anyway.



Student Handbook

- *Examples:* "I am gay," "I am homosexual/transgender," "I have a homosexual orientation." Homosexual conduct, defined as acts or identifying statements, is incompatible with enrollment at TCA and is a basis for dismissal. All students must be treated with dignity and respect, free of threats or harassment.

Orlando Sentinel

In Volusia County, Trinity Christian Academy's 2018 handbook stated that saying "I am gay" is grounds for expulsion. The private school received more than \$1 million in publicly funded school vouchers that year.

Uthmeier and some of the new critics have tried to coat their concerns about Muslim schools by linking the theologies or school leaders to anti-American sentiment or even terrorism. But the Freedom Caucus was quite clear in saying what it really wanted: "...taxpayer dollars should not be going to Islamic schools ..."

Listen, there are some Muslim extremists just like there are some Christian extremists. There are also many faith-based schools that do spectacular jobs teaching kids and do so in an inclusive manner.

The solution isn't to allow indoctrination and discrimination from some religions and not others. It's to ban both altogether at schools that run on public money.

If you believe your faith endorses discrimination and warped versions of history, you're fortunate to live in a country where you're allowed to both hold and espouse those beliefs. But taxpayers shouldn't fund any of it — no matter who's doing it.

