

Florida's Supreme Court rejects ballot initiatives seeking school vouchers: Church-state watchdogs praise ruling

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Florida's Supreme Court has tossed out two statewide ballot initiatives aimed at ending a longstanding ban on public funding for religious institutions, drawing praise from church-state watchdogs.

Civil liberties groups had filed suit to remove the amendments headed for the November ballot, which sought to rewrite the state constitution to allow church groups to participate in government programs and pave the way for school voucher programs.

Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, which supported the plaintiffs in the case, hailed the August 28 ruling.

"Religious liberty and public education are two cornerstones of the American way of life, and these amendments would have badly damaged both of them," said Americans United's vice president Merrill Shapiro, a rabbi who was a plaintiff in the suit against the initiatives. "We're glad the Florida Supreme Court did its duty and put a stop to it."

Other groups that opposed the ballot measures included the Anti-Defamation League, People for the American Way and various state associations of teachers and administrators.

If passed, the initiatives would have opened state funding to religious organizations. They also provided a means by which state money could be used for vouchers at private schools—including religious institutions. Florida law currently prohibits taxpayer-funded vouchers for private school tuition.

Supporters of the initiatives contended that the current constitutional restrictions were originally enacted by Protestants to discriminate against Catholic groups. The Florida Catholic Conference and Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Miami were among religious organizations that stood in support of the voucher program.

Gary McCaleb, senior counsel for the Alliance Defense Fund, which provided financial assistance for the case, called the state's current policy "obnoxious."

Added McCaleb: "Floridians should have had the right to vote on the matter, and obviously it's very sad when advocacy groups step in and silence citizens from voting." *-Religion News Service*