

Tax-credit backer challenges 'status quo'

Point of effort, he says, is to 'care more about the kids than the system'

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Tom Swatzel thrust himself into the statewide squall over tax breaks for private school tuition when he took the podium to emcee a State House rally for hundreds of tax-credit supporters.

Largely unknown outside his Georgetown County home until lately, Swatzel, 47, had the parents and children from home-school groups and small Christian schools cheering and yelling last week.

He says he is questioning a stodgy education establishment that has parents fed up.

"Those who are in charge of educating our children are clinging to the status quo," Swatzel said. "It's time to say no to the status quo."

The man behind the movement to offer tax breaks to parents sending children to private school is a soft-spoken charter fisherman from Murrells Inlet whose own daughter goes to public school.

His public persona until Tuesday was that of a former Georgetown County Council member who imposed term limits on himself and left office in 2002.

Now Swatzel and a political group he started, South Carolinians for Responsible Government, have emerged as the main drivers outside the State House for one of Gov. Mark Sanford's top priorities, a tuition tax-credit bill.

Called "Put Parents in Charge" by supporters, the bill would give parents a tax break to help with the expenses of teaching their children at home or sending them to private school or a different public school. So far, it has received a lukewarm reception from lawmakers.

But opponents say the bill could be dangerous. They fear Swatzel's effort will catch fire in the Legislature, making South Carolina one of the first states to try such a sweeping tax-credit program.

The results, they say, could range from busting the state's budget to resegregating the schools.

"There's no way they can convince any rational South Carolinian it's good for South Carolina," said Sen. Joel Lourie, D-Richland, a leading opponent. "It's unaffordable, it's unproven and it's unaccountable."

'HE ... DID HIS HOMEWORK'

Tuesday's rally had State House observers buzzing. "Who is Tom Swatzel?"

He was born and raised in Hickory, N.C., and his family vacationed for years at Garden City Beach, just north of Murrells Inlet.

He loved the sleepy beach community. After earning a degree in marine biology at the University of North

Carolina at Wilmington, he got a job as a fishing boat captain.

Eventually, he became chief executive officer of Capt. Dick's Marina, which charters fishing boats and runs boat tours out of Murrells Inlet.

Swatzel's first and only stint as an elected official was as a Georgetown County Council member from 1994 to 2002.

What community members described as his unblinking conviction to libertarian-leaning beliefs impressed some and angered many. He argued against taxes and government regulations. He was for property rights and individual freedoms.

Those who worked with him say Swatzel and others elected around the same time brought a professionalism to county government, which had operated more like a small-town, good-ol'-boy network.

"He's a very conscientious fella and dedicated to what he believes in," said Linwood Altman, a longtime community leader. "Personally, I like him. He was up front on most issues. You were either for him or against him."

Swatzel wasn't a consensus-builder or a compromiser, Altman and others said.

"Tom Swatzel is an ideologue," said Carol Winans, a Georgetown community activist. Swatzel worked to kill a plan she supported to use tourism taxes to build public swimming pools at area schools. He thought tourist taxes were the wrong way to fund local recreation projects, she said.

Swatzel often won fellow council members to his side because he was better prepared to argue than others on the council, Winans said.

"He forever won issues when he was on County Council because he was the one who did his homework," she said. "Most of the time, the other council members weren't ready for him."

'NEWS RELEASES AND GUERRILLA TACTICS'

The path that led Swatzel to South Carolinians for Responsible Government began before he served on County Council.

In 1988, the state was considering requiring a saltwater fishing license and fee that Swatzel and others feared would hurt their tourist-driven businesses.

He mounted a campaign against it and sought help from a friend of a friend in politics — Bill Wilson, who had started his career doing grass-roots organizing for President Reagan in the mid-Atlantic states.

Wilson taught Swatzel "pointers about news releases and guerrilla tactics," Swatzel said. It began an off-and-on relationship that now is helping shape the tax-credit debate.

Among the things Swatzel learned was to take over the news story by swamping public meetings with supporters from his side and making it appear that he had the bulk of the public support.

The technique was on display at Tuesday's rally, which was attended by hundreds wearing royal blue hats advertising "Put Parents in Charge."

The careers of Swatzel, Sanford and Wilson have intersected several times in the past 15 years.

All three were active in an effort to require term limits on politicians. Now, Wilson — and an Illinois-based group he works with called Legislative Education Action Drive, which advocates tuition tax credits — is helping Swatzel get Sanford's bill passed.

“South Carolina is clearly one of the largest projects” for LEAD, Wilson said. “Our focus, as we see it, is to be a catalyst and assistant to local groups to get started.”

AN ATTACK ON PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

Opponents are alarmed.

Swatzel's campaign for tuition tax credits, they say, has been anti-public-school. In direct mail, TV and radio ads and e-mails, his group has been critical — opponents say harshly so — of S.C. schools, teachers and students.

At a news conference Thursday, members of the NAACP said they fear the program would cause white parents to flee the public schools.

Opponents also say the plan would drain resources from schools and other state agencies — hurting state programs from patrolling highways to caring for the mentally ill.

“When people really understand the facts of this bill, they don't support it,” said state Superintendent of Education Inez Tenenbaum, a Democrat.

Swatzel says he has nothing against public schools, and he doesn't want to take advantage of the tax credit himself.

In fact, he's thrilled with Waccamaw Elementary, the public school where his 11-year-old daughter, Hayley, is the spelling bee champion.

Swatzel wants every parent to have the same opportunity to give their children as good an education, he says — whether at home or in public or private school.

“The bureaucrats in the Columbia education establishment have misrepresented the truth of what Put Parents in Charge would do,” Swatzel said.

Public schools likely wouldn't lose many students, he says. Instead, the students who are struggling will leave for schools that can better suit their needs. It will help students and public schools improve, he argues.

The bill is in the House, where Democrats and many Republicans question whether it has the votes to get out of subcommittee. House members likely won't begin to take up the issue at least until late next month.

Swatzel is confident the bill will pass, but he'll be back next year if it doesn't.

“Our whole point is ... we should care more about the kids than the system,” he said. “What this state needs is real, meaningful reform.”