

Park Maitland School denies Chinese ties; parents decry DeSantis' stripping of vouchers

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Park Maitland School said Saturday that it does not have any connection to the Communist Party of China and does not know [why Florida yanked it from participating in its school voucher programs](#) claiming it had “direct ties” to the Chinese leadership. “We were not contacted in advance and are seeking more information regarding the basis for this decision,” the school said in an emailed statement to the Orlando Sentinel on Saturday. “Our schools are locally run, abide by local, state, and federal laws, and do not have ties to any government or political party, either foreign or domestic.”

Winter Springs parents Joslyn and David Bear have two children at Park Maitland, both using state scholarships this year to help cover some of their tuition costs. They were surprised and upset by the state’s action against a school that they both attended as children and that has a reputation for providing an “outstanding” education.

“Their education has nothing to do with communism or Chinese ideology,” Joslyn Bear said. “Both of our children receive Florida Empowerment Scholarships, one of them because she has special needs. To pull their school from the scholarship program will disrupt my children’s and their classmates’ educational experience and emotional stability for no legitimate reason whatsoever.”

David Bear said his family can afford to keep their children at Park Maitland even without the scholarships, which on average cover about \$10,000 for a child with disabilities and about \$8,000 for others. The family has a daughter in kindergarten and a son in second grade.

But some families, he said, may not be so fortunate and may have enrolled children at Park Maitland, where tuition tops \$20,000 a year, because this year they qualified for state scholarships that could help cover some of the bills. Florida recently expanded eligibility in its voucher programs so that scholarships once targeted to low-income youngsters or those with disabilities are now open to all students.

Bear said the state’s action in late September could leave parents with few other options for their children, if they cannot remain at Park Maitland. “It’s not fair,” he said.

In a message to parents on Saturday, Michael Anna, the head of school, also denied the school had any inappropriate connections.

“Despite the recent claims, Park Maitland school does not have ties to the Communist Party of China or any other government,” that message read.

Park Maitland — long viewed as one of Central Florida’s top-rated private schools — was working with families affected by the state’s decision, Anna said in his statement.

“We don’t want any of our students or families to have their education interrupted by these changes, and will be working directly with our families to ensure they can remain enrolled in our school,” said the message, shared with the Sentinel by a parent.

The 55-year-old Orange County school was one of four private school campuses that Gov. Ron DeSantis said late Friday had been removed from the state voucher programs because of ties to Communist China banned by a new law he signed this spring.

DeSantis’ office said the state took action because the connections to Communist China “constitute an imminent threat to the health, safety, and welfare of these school’s students and the public.”

But Park Maitland disputed that in its message to parents. “As you all know, our school fosters a learning environment where students thrive. We place the well-being, safety, and learning of our students above all else,” it said.

Sagemont Preparatory School in Weston, which runs an upper and lower school, on Saturday released a similar statement to Park Maitland’s denying ties to China, [according to the South Florida Sun Sentinel](#). Its campuses were also suspended from the voucher programs on Friday.

The governor’s office did not offer any evidence or details about its investigation into the schools in its announcement released at about 5:30 p.m. Friday.

But all the suspended schools are part of Spring Education Group, which their websites say, is part of Primavera Holdings Limited, an investment firm based in Hong Kong and “owned by Chinese persons.”

The Wall Street Journal reported in May that Primavera had in 2022 quietly purchased the Princeton Review and Tutor.com, raising some concerns “at a time of increased scrutiny of Chinese investment in the U.S.,” and noted it is also invested in TikTok’s parent company.

DeSantis has called the Communist Party of China the United States’ “greatest geopolitical threat” and signed laws in recent years that seek to limit its influence, including one this year that bans TikTok from government-owned phones and devices.

Park Maitland, with an A+ rating, enrolls about 640 students, according to the school search website Niche.

Last school year fewer than 50 of its students used state vouchers, according to Step Up For Students, which administers most of Florida's scholarships. The school received more than \$329,000 in scholarship money, Step Up's data shows.

Its current scholarship numbers were not available, but Park Maitland may have more students using them this year because Florida changed the eligibility rules.

Park Maitland has a campus on U.S. Highway 17-92 in Maitland and also one on Minnesota Avenue in Winter Park, the former Parke House Academy.

"We are regularly acknowledged as one of the best private schools in our area and have a track record of delivering outstanding educational outcomes, which is why parents choose us," the school's statement to the Sentinel said.

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