

# TIMESNEWS

## S.C. Senate race: Vouchers, Rich assailed at forum

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By **Jenny Overman**  
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A campaign-oriented forum held by S.C. Senate candidate Mandy Powers-Norrell last week took a turn for the weird when her opponent, House District 45 Rep. Mick Mulvaney (R-Indian Land) and other GOP officials showed up.

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Although the forum, held at the Fort Mill Library in Baxter, was ostensibly about school vouchers, which Norrell says she opposes - it was also an opportunity for her to link Mulvaney with New York millionaire Howard Rich, a known supporter of school vouchers, and his ties to campaigns across the state. It didn't appear as if Mulvaney was expected to be in the audience.

Ross Shealy, described by Norrell's campaign as the "premier expert on the danger of Private School Vouchers" was one of the speakers. More than 40 people attended the Sept. 24 forum, including several school board members from Fort Mill and Lancaster County, and educators from both school districts.

Shealy, who runs a political blog called "Barbecue and Politics," said in Fort Mill Township, Republican Deborah Long, a candidate for Mulvaney's House District 45 seat, and Mulvaney have accepted money from Rich and his associates through donations made by multiple limited liability corporations. Although prohibited in North Carolina and other states, the donations are legal under South Carolina elections law.

Mulvaney accepted approximately \$9,000 during his campaign for the S.C. House two years ago. He has vowed not to accept funding from Rich or his associates during this campaign.

"I absolutely, positively will not," Mulvaney said.

"In Fort Mill we have wonderful schools here and a threat like vouchers could significantly

Vouchers are one of the biggest threats



facing Fort Mill area schools, according to Norrell.

undermine education in the area," she said. "We need to focus on making public schools more effective instead of private schools more affordable."

Mulvaney, in comments he made to the *Fort Mill Times* after the forum, said he is a supporter of private school tax credits. He called it the best idea that has come through the legislature in the last two years for helping students in failing schools.

"There's still kids that don't get the best possible education despite the fact they are in the best school system in the state, specifically special needs and gifted and talented," Mulvaney said. "Public schools do an excellent job of teaching the typical child. Where we don't deliver the best product yet, and I think they'd agree, is on the ends of the system."

In 2007, Mulvaney voted for an amendment to a bill that would allow tax credits for private schools, to parents of children in failing school districts.

The amendment, which failed, would only have affected failing districts, he emphasized.

"There's an irrational fear of a program no one has introduced and it's keeping us from having meaningful dialogue about what is really going on in this state," Mulvaney said. "If I had to classify threats to our education system, Act 388, a top heavy administration and money not getting to the classroom and supplementary pay to teachers would dramatically overshadow vouchers."

Norrell opposes tax credits, which she says will take money out of the public schools.

"Vouchers are presupposing that private education is better than public school," Norrell said. "We have to get over the notion that our schools are so bad we have to send our kids to private schools."

Several members of the York County Republican Party were among the crowd last Wednesday night, including party Chairman Glenn McCall, who said that the forum clearly had "a bent."

McCall said Gov. Mark Sanford, as well as many legislators, favor school choice, not vouchers.

"Competition makes everything better," McCall said. "I truly believe that."

After the forum, Norrell discussed some of her personal decisions on education that have come under fire recently.

Political blog fitsnews.com published a

story last week that Norrell petitioned the Lancaster County School District several years ago to move her son from Clinton Elementary School, where he is zoned to attend school, to North Elementary School. Norrell said she did petition the district for the change, but only because Clinton Elementary School was moving toward a year-round schedule and she wanted her son to have summers off to spend with her.

Recently, Norrell was asked by the Fort Mill School District to stop sending campaign e-mails to school board members.

Superintendent Keith Callicutt said the school's attorney believes the e-mails were a violation of the South Carolina Ethics Reform Act.

Norrell has also been criticized for sending home campaign materials with elementary school students, but said that was a misunderstanding. She talked with a group of students at Heath Springs Elementary School, she said, which is outside the Senate 16 district.

She gave the students stickers and fliers to take home, she added, because "they wanted them."

"I never asked them to have their parents vote for me because they are all outside of my district," Norrell said.

Although Heath Springs Elementary School is not part of the Senate 16 district, parts of the district are zoned to attend the school. Norrell said she wasn't aware of any students in the school that lived in the Senate 16 district.

"I don't think it was very many, if any," Norrell said. "I didn't know that, but at the same time I never asked to have their parents vote for me. What we did was, the teacher requested campaign materials, and so I brought it. I was not trying to influence anything."

She emphasized that she has never talked about the election at a school inside her district. Norrell, the Lancaster city attorney, just finished volunteering at Indian Land High School, leading a mock trial.

While there, she instructed a student to remove a campaign button she was wearing, Norrell said.

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