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## **Bush, McBride Clash On Taxes, Class-Size Plan**

By Lesley Clark

Miami Herald Staff Writer

Democrat Bill McBride, aggressively pressed for details Tuesday night about how he would pay for reducing class sizes in public schools if a proposal he supports is approved by voters, said he would cut state programs across the board.

McBride's comments during the challenger's third and final debate with Gov. Jeb Bush immediately turned the signature encounter of the gubernatorial campaign into a heated discussion about taxes in Florida.

Bush warned that if a proposed constitutional amendment to cap class sizes passes, taxes will rise, and he repeatedly attacked McBride for failing to provide specifics on how he would build more classrooms.

"You can't be advocating something as governor and not have the responsibility to say how you would pay for it," Bush said. "He can't be all things to all people."

But McBride, who has repeatedly assailed Bush's education record, accused Bush of giving voters "all kinds of wild numbers" about McBride's education proposals in an effort to scare them.

He told debate moderator Tim Russert, host of NBC's Meet the Press, that estimates for the cost of reducing class size range from \$8 billion to \$27 billion. But when Russert asked McBride what he thought the actual cost would be, the candidate replied "somewhere in between."

The audience - partisans from both camps - laughed. When Russert asked McBride point blank how he would pay for smaller classes, listing several taxes that a recent Bush campaign attack ad suggests McBride would impose, McBride replied with a curt "no" to hiking sales and property taxes and an emphatic "no" to a state income tax.

Then, Russert pushed, "Where do you find the money?"

McBride countered with an attack on the governor's record.

"The real issue in Florida is whether you care about our public schools," McBride said. "This issue is not about taxes, it's about priorities. Who cares and who is going to do the most for our public schools."

#### CUTS IN SERVICES

Russert pushed him further, suggesting that the one tax increase McBride has advocated, a 50-cent-per-pack levy on cigarettes, would not raise enough money to lower class sizes as much as the amendment requires. McBride suggested that programs could be cut "across the board" and the money put into education.

Bush, who told Russert he would have to "consider raising taxes" if the amendment is approved, appeared scornful.

"I'm furious that this campaign is not taking this issue seriously and the dramatic effect this will have on working families," he said.

The debate was crucial for both candidates in a race that remained close two weeks before the Nov. 5 election. The most recent poll showed Bush five percentage points ahead of McBride - 49-44 - with a four-point margin of error.

The debate opened with a flurry of questions about gun laws and crime, but the snippiest exchange came over remarks made by the Rev. Victor Curry on his Miami radio show comparing the Bush family to neo-Nazis. He made the remarks just as McBride arrived at the Miami Beach station.

McBride disassociated himself from the remarks, but Bush called on him to "repudiate not only the words, but the man."

McBride bristled, and for a few moments the debate turned into a back-and-forth with McBride accusing the governor of suggesting that McBride agreed with Curry's comments.

"I did not," Bush said.

"Yes, you did," McBride retorted. "I didn't stand by these comments, the governor knows that. You should be ashamed of yourself for suggesting otherwise."

#### A BROTHER'S SUPPORT

Russert quizzed both men about their staunchest supporters, noting that recent news stories have criticized President Bush for using federal dollars and the

political muscle of the White House to help his brother. McBride, though, declined to criticize the brothers.

"I would expect nothing less from a brother, " he said.

The governor, ticking off federal decisions, including one to prevent most oil drilling off the Florida coast, called it a "convergence of good politics and good policy."

## ON TEACHERS UNION

McBride, who has made Bush's education record the centerpiece of his campaign, was asked whether he has any differences with the state teachers union, which is backing his campaign with cash and staff members.

After a noticeable pause, McBride suggested he might disagree with the union's position on charter schools. But he told Russert that despite the support from the union, he would not be beholden to a single interest group.

"I interviewed hard for their endorsement, " McBride said. "They've never asked me to take a position on a single issue."

Like the two debates that preceded it, Tuesday's face-to-face was marked by several sharp exchanges between the candidates, with an intense focus on their differing views on education, even as Russert tried to broaden the approach.

The two disagreed starkly on two major issues. Bush supports current state law preventing gay couples from adopting children; McBride called it "discriminatory."

And in an upcoming fight in the Legislature over capping lawsuit awards for patients who are harmed by doctors, Bush said he supports limiting the awards.

McBride, a former managing partner at one of the state's largest law firms, said he would not support limits.

Bush used his closing remarks to rattle off more specifics, promising that students will read at their grade level, teachers will receive more training and he will work to reduce violent crime and keep taxes low.

McBride tried to leave voters with the images of his days as a platoon leader in Vietnam, drawing a parallel to Florida's troubles under Bush.

"I know what it's like to lead people in very difficult situations, " he said.

