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Lawsuit to kill scholarship program will hurt Pine Hills

By Latrina Peters-Gipson



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Saint Andrew Catholic School in the Pine Hills neighborhood was on the verge of closure a few years ago. The neighborhood had changed dramatically over time, and the school lost its connection with the community. Though parents wanted educational alternatives, they viewed the school as unaffordable.

The educators and leaders of

Saint Andrew rallied and worked to become part of the community again. With the help of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, we proved to the parents of Pine Hills that a private education was indeed within their reach. Our school started to grow again, and more importantly, the parents had an option that worked for their children.

Now all of that is in jeopardy because of a lawsuit.

Filed in 2014 by the Florida Education Association and Florida NAACP, the suit seeks to uproot nearly 96,000 students throughout Florida, including 9,000 in Orange County. Nearly 70 percent of the students are black or brown and more than half live in single-parent homes. Their average family income is \$24,000 a year, barely above the poverty line.

Even though two courts ruled against them, the plaintiffs keep appealing, most recently to the Florida Supreme Court. Meanwhile, the scholarship parents are afraid.

The lawsuit is a disservice to the parents of Pine Hills who work hard to provide a better life for their kids.

When they heard about a lawsuit that might take their scholarships away, they were upset. Parents came to me in tears, afraid for what the future might hold for their children. Many of them came to us because their children were not doing well in their previous schools. Now they had a school where their child was succeeding. What would happen if that opportunity went away?

Pine Hills has the highest concentration of scholarship students in the state. Parents are choosing for a reason, but has anyone at the FEA or NAACP taken time to learn why?

I think the lawsuit is a result of misunderstanding

regarding the scholarship program and the schools that participate.

Contrary to the myths, Saint Andrew is an accredited school, with certified teachers. We have staff and volunteers that speak many languages, including Spanish, Creole, and Vietnamese to cater to our diverse population. We teach Math and Science and we do it according to state standards.

Yes, faith is an important component of our education, but we are inclusive and only 10 percent of our students are Catholic. We teach students that “God is in all relationships,” but we also teach the Big Bang.

We also set lofty goals for our students. After all, our motto is “College and Heaven.” The faith, lofty goals, and strong academics create a learning community with few disruptions and more time for students to focus. The structure we provide keeps kids from going down the wrong path.

This is what the parents of Pine Hills want for their children. It is why we’ve gone from nearly closing a few years ago to 344 students today. Of those, 295 use the scholarship. I think the people behind the lawsuit also misunderstand our parents. I’m not sure the teacher’s union or NAACP has taken the time to understand what they want for their children and why. We took the time, and now we thrive because our students succeed.

As an educator, I know how much the educational landscape has changed to become more diverse and accommodating to students with different needs. The FEA and NAACP are trying to resist something they cannot stop. The definition of public education no longer means children are zoned to neighborhood schools. It means choices for parents and students alike.

But choices can’t be just for the rich.

That is why the scholarship exists. It ensures equity and equality for those of lesser means. If the FEA and NAACP want to help low-income communities, they need to listen to them, not try to take away opportunities.

Latrina Peters-Gipson is principal of Saint Andrew Catholic School and a 20-year veteran in education.