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Rick Scott, Alex Sink called on to save Tax-Credit Scholarship Program

By **LANE WRIGHT**

Some educators across the state are worried that all the gubernatorial candidates' talk of tax cuts for businesses might mean the demise of the corporate tax scholarship program.

A small coalition of community leaders gathered at the Mount Bethel Christian Academy in Fort Lauderdale Monday morning to call on Rick Scott and Alex Sink to pledge their support for the program.

Julio Fuentes, president of the Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options, said he watched Democrats and Republicans come together on the issue of the voucher program in the legislative session this spring. He's hoping it will be an example to the candidates.

"They put politics aside," said Fuentes, "and today we are asking Alex Sink and Rick Scott to do the same."

Both candidates have proposed plans that could jeopardize the future of the scholarship program that funded the K-12 education of nearly 29,000 students at 1,033 private schools throughout Florida last year.

Scott has proposed doing away with the corporate income tax as a way of drawing businesses into the state and increasing Florida's economic productivity.

But while he's suggested getting rid of the dedicated funding source of the scholarship program, business leaders defend his plan saying that doesn't mean he's getting rid of the program itself.

The corporate tax-credit scholarship is popular among the business community, but Associated Industries of Florida president, Barney Bishop, says while a tax credit is nice, a tax cut is better.

"The business community doesn't want to see this program go away," said Bishop. "We'll help find another source to fund it."

Alex Sink has stated that she would look at the option of giving new businesses a three-year levy on the tax.

Sink and Scott are vying to be seen as the one most capable of bringing jobs to the state and turning the languishing economy around. But some community leaders say they're using the tax-credit scholarship program as a way of gaining political capital with the business community instead of focusing more on the children.

"I certainly am not about to tell them how to run their campaigns," said Rev. C.E. Glover, the pastor of Mount Bethel Baptist Church, "but I will tell them that there is no reason to treat a scholarship for low-income students like a political football."

On Sunday, the coalition's full-page ad appeared in the Tallahassee Democrat calling on both Sink and Scott to pledge their support for the program. By Monday morning, Scott had responded to the group with a letter saying he "will protect this learning option and allow more children to choose it.

"I support school choice," the letter continued. "And I strongly support these scholarships. I am committed to finding a solution that will continue to allow families more choice in where to send their child to school."

Fuentes said they were very happy to receive Scott's letter so quickly.

"It is encouraging to see that our message has resonated," said Fuentes. "And we hope that it will resonate with Miss Sink as well."

