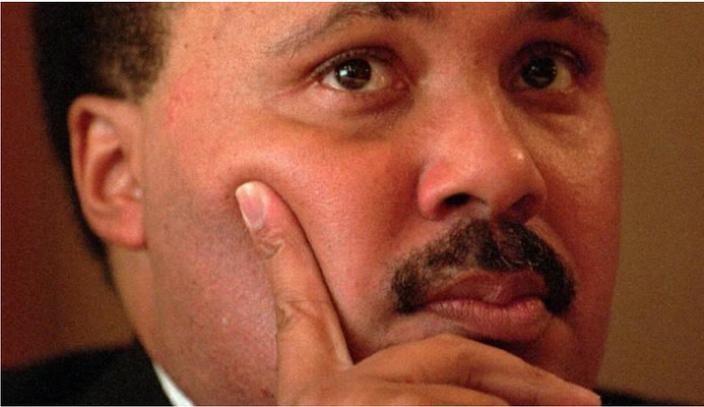


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Martin Luther King III makes case for tax-credit scholarships

By Jessica Bakeman



Martin Luther King III. (AP Photo)

TALLAHASSEE—Martin Luther King Jr. would have supported tax-credit funded scholarships that allow needy children to attend private schools. At least, his son thinks so.

“I would assume my father would support anything that lifted up and created opportunities for ‘the least of these,’” Martin Luther King III told POLITICO Florida during a recent phone interview, quoting the Bible. “I don’t think he would get caught up in the politics of it.”

The younger King, though, has waded into the complicated racial, religious and partisan politics of the controversial voucher-like program. On Tuesday, a day after the national holiday honoring his father, King will headline a Tallahassee rally promoting the program, putting himself at odds with Florida’s statewide teachers’ union as well as the state’s chapter of the NAACP.

With black and Hispanic religious leaders from around the state, King will call on the Florida Education Association to drop its lawsuit challenging the program, through which corporations get a 100 percent tax credit for donations to organizations that grant scholarships to low-income students.

National black and Hispanic education reform advocacy groups, as well as Florida-based coalitions of minority clergy, have denounced the union’s efforts to halt the scholarships. They argue the program provides opportunities for high-quality education to predominantly minority children who wouldn’t get it otherwise.

Prominent black religious leaders in the state, including those who run schools that benefit from the scholarship program, will also speak at the rally. Rev. R.B. Holmes of Tallahassee and Bishop Victor Curry of Miami, who is also former president of the Miami Dade chapter of the NAACP, will join King and other advocates at the intersection of Duval and Madison streets, near the east side of the Capitol, at 11:30 a.m.

King has been a national advocate for tax-credit scholarships since the late 1990s. But he was compelled to join the fight in Florida because he has worked with religious leaders in the state, he said.

He stressed that the debate shouldn’t be political.

He identifies as a Democrat but sometimes agrees with Republicans on certain issues, he said. While Republicans championed Florida’s voucher programs, Democrats have supported similar policies elsewhere. King specifically referenced a legislative fight over tax-credit scholarships in New York, where Gov. Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat, has been a proponent.

“It is partisan, but it shouldn’t be. That’s part of the problem,” he said. “According to who brings an issue to the table, people will get up and support it. It shouldn’t be based on that. It should be based on whether the kids are performing or not.

“This is not the way that it works, because politics is in everything, but if we could get the politics out of it and stop looking at the politics of who is this going to hurt or help and look at what is in the best interest of kids and families, I think these issues can be addressed,” King said.

King said he disagrees with the leaders of Florida’s NAACP chapter, who oppose the scholarship program.

Adora Obi Nweze, president of the state’s NAACP chapter, said earlier this month the group objects to the fact that not all of Florida’s students have access to the opportunity.

“All children cannot go to a charter school, or they can’t have a voucher, so you’re picking and choosing,” Nweze said. “And that is a policy we can’t support.”

King said the argument “may have some merit,” but the benefits outweigh the drawbacks.

“A significant number of those children happen to be children who are of color, meaning blacks, Latinos and Hispanics,” he said. “It is open to all children, but many of

them are in poor families and, generally, poor families do not have the same options that others might have in our society. I think sometimes we have to balance out the equation. While this might not be available, historically, to someone who is wealthy, that person doesn't need this kind of situation because they already have options because of their status in life."

He said there is a "natural marriage" between the NAACP and unions, and he suspects that's why the organization has supported FEA's lawsuit.

The union has argued the program is unconstitutional, contending it creates a parallel and inferior system of public education, siphons resources from the traditional public schools that serve the most disadvantaged students and violates the separation of church and state.

"We're concerned about making sure that everybody has access to a high-quality free public schools," FEA president Joanne McCall said during a recent interview. "People can tell me all day to drop the suit, but it's the hands of the court at this point. If they're telling me to drop the suit, they might be a little worried about it."

King said he supports public education and doesn't believe his advocacy for tax-credit scholarships negates that. He wants "options" for children, he said, adding that he avoids the politicized term, "choice."

"My view is, there is room for both," he said. "It's not

an either-or. It should never have been framed that way. The question is, what is the best thing for the kids of our nation?"

"We certainly have public schools that some will go to and do well, but we also have other options," he said. "Some people need a targeted kind of learning. They need a different approach, like charter schools. There are virtual classrooms that some will do well in. The reality is, if there are no options, if there is just one particular standard, then someone is going to fall through the cracks, as we've seen."

At one point, King likened students at traditional public schools to "a herd of cattle, running through on one pathway."

Without educational innovation, the U.S. will struggle to compete globally, he argued.

"If our education system does not continue to improve and be enhanced and be innovative and almost be revolutionary, then we will continue to lose our place in the world," he said.

"One of the things my dad and mom worked on throughout their lives was the eradication of poverty," he said. "Although we have made strides as a nation, the issue is at epidemic levels now. [We need to] address this issue, starting with our children in kindergarten."