

January 19, 2016

## Tax-credit scholarship advocates target FEA in massive rally



Martin Luther King III speaks to demonstrators at the Capitol as they rally in support of the school voucher program Tuesday. (AP Photo/Steve Cannon)

By Jessica Bakeman

TALLAHASSEE — Several thousand supporters of tax-credit funded scholarships targeted the statewide teachers' union in a massive rally near the Capitol on Tuesday.

Black and Hispanic religious leaders and civil rights activists, including Martin Luther King III, implored the Florida Education Association to drop its lawsuit challenging the voucher-like program that serves about 75,000 students.

King and prominent Florida religious leaders such as Rev. R.B. Holmes and Bishop Victor Curry delivered speeches from a stage erected at the intersection of Duval

and Madison streets. Donna Allen, a mother of a scholarship recipient who was a contestant on "The Voice," performed "We Are Family" and "I Will Survive." The program was broadcast on a giant screen suspended behind the stage.

The crowd, mostly consisting of children, was packed shoulder-to-shoulder in a barricaded two-block stretch of Duval Street. Attendees wore matching neon green T-shirts with the words, "drop the suit."

The protest was paid for by the American Federation for Children, a national group that advocates for tax-credit scholarships, vouchers and charter schools. A

spokeswoman said the rally cost \$1 million.

Speakers were unsparing in their criticism of FEA. They questioned why teachers would oppose the program, through which corporations get a 100 percent tax credit for donations to organizations that grant scholarships to low-income students.

Some speakers ascribed motives to the FEA. Julio Fuentes, president and CEO of the Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options, a national education reform group, said the FEA challenged the tax-credit scholarship program but not other Florida voucher programs because the scholarships help predominantly low-income students. (In fact, however, the FEA has been involved in other challenges of voucher programs, including the state's Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts that allow students with disabilities to attend private schools.)

"Why are they doing this, we ask?" Fuentes said during the rally. "The truth is, there is one big difference between the tax-credit scholarship program and those other programs that I mentioned. The scholarship program is the only one that exclusively serves low-income kids in our state.

"Why does that matter?" he said. "Because our opponents think if you don't have a lot of money, you won't fight back. They don't think you're smart enough or tough enough or connected enough. They think that you all are going to roll over and let this pass. So tell me, are you going to roll over? Are you going to quit? Are you going to give up? Are you going to let them take opportunity away from our children? No."

King's speech was less damning of the teachers' union than those of the other speakers. He focused on broader issues, like national spending priorities and the school-to-prison pipeline.

"No one is saying that public education should not be funded," King said. "What is being said is that people and families need options. One option cannot work."

He said politicians are more willing to spend money on war than education.

"We wouldn't even be having any debate if we were talking about building a new missile," he said. "We spend

millions of dollars on death and destruction, and we have a different discussion when we're talking about life and the preservation of life."

Improving educational opportunities for minority students will result in fewer of them ending up in jail, King said.

"There is a disproportionate number of folks of color in jail," he said. "If we educate properly at the earlier levels, we will have less or almost none in prison at the end of the scale."

During an earlier interview with POLITICO Florida, King said his father, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., probably would have supported tax-credit scholarships. He reiterated that at the rally on Tuesday.

"My dad — I don't know if I can aptly speak to what he would say today, but I what I can say is, I know that he always stood up for justice," he said. "And this is an issue of justice."

FEA has argued the scholarship program 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.

In a lengthy statement on Tuesday, the union defended its lawsuit, saying the scholarships divert "taxpayer dollars to support private schools that are largely unregulated, don't have to follow the state's academic standards, don't have to hire qualified teachers and don't have to prove to the state that they are using public money wisely."

FEA president Joanne McCall said the group would not drop its legal challenge, one of two major lawsuits pending against the program. The statutory cap for the scholarships was \$447 million this year and will grow to \$559 million in 2016-17.

"For more than a year, voucher groups have been demanding FEA drop a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the tax-credit vouchers," she said. "What are they so afraid of going to the courts to ensure this voucher scheme is legal? Let's let the courts decide this once and for all. We're not dropping our legal challenge."