

Black Leaders To The Teachers' Union: Drop The Suit

By Bob Sparks

On Monday we celebrated the birth of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. On Tuesday, Dr. King's son, Martin Luther King III, was in Tallahassee for an important civil rights cause in Florida.

The issue of education is front and center in today's discussion of civil rights. The opportunity to have a better life through learning is the topic of legislative floor speeches, campaign rallies and sermons throughout the country.

A chance for a better education for minorities was the primary purpose of King's visit. He lent his and his family's iconic name to the vitally important issue of educating minority children. First Lady Michelle Obama has called education the "single most important" civil rights issue of today.

King and other prominent African-American leaders were in the state capital to urge the state's teachers' union to drop a lawsuit designed to deny minority children a fighting chance to succeed. He was joined by several prominent religious figures such as Bishop Victor Curry of Miami's New Birth Baptist Church and the Rev. R.B. Holmes of the Bethel Missionary Baptist Church in Tallahassee, among others.

The Florida Education Association is challenging the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program, which provides tax credits to private-sector donors. Recipients of these scholarships, all low income and mostly minority, enables desperate parents to remove their child from a failing school and enroll in a private school with a scholarship.

"This is about justice; this is about righteousness," King told the more than 10,000 who gathered. "This is about freedom—the freedom to choose for your family and your child."

Of those who get the scholarships, 58.3 percent of the households are headed by a single adult, according to Step Up for Students, the non-profit group administering the scholarship program. No taxpayer money is used.

Almost one year ago, Leon County Judge George Reynolds ruled the FEA lacked standing to bring the lawsuit. This means they were unable to prove they have suffered any harm.

Pleas from parents and African-American community

leaders to "drop the suit" have failed to stop the union. The hope was King's presence, as well as other prominent Florida leaders, would demonstrate the widespread disdain for the lawsuit's desired effect.

"In the name of the Lord, drop the suit," said Rev. Holmes. "In the name of the Holy Spirit, drop the suit." The union is not budging.

"What are (opponents) so afraid of, going to the courts to ensure this voucher scheme is legal?" said FEA President Joanne McCall. "Let's let the courts decide this once and for all."

The U.S. Supreme Court has already decided this issue. In 2011 the Court ruled that plaintiffs challenging tax credits, not government spending, lacked standing.

With King taking the right stance on this important

issue, scholarship proponents enjoy the support of the NAACP, right? Wrong.

Sadly, the Florida Chapter of the NAACP is backing the lawsuit. How can this be?

"All children cannot go to a charter school, or they can't have a voucher, so you're picking and choosing," said Chapter President Adora Obi Nweze. "And that is a policy we can't support."

This is mind-boggling. As the

Titanic was sinking, there were only enough lifeboats to save about one-third of the passengers. They picked and chose women and children to save.

Providing nearly 500,000 disadvantaged children the chance to get a better education is a lifeboat. Why not deploy them?

Instead of dropping the suit, the union appealed Reynolds' ruling to the First District Court of Appeal.

"Given all this choice that Florida is providing, why in the world would the union challenge the program that helps disadvantaged families," said Bishop Curry. "Maybe they think we will not stand up to them or stand up for our children."

On the day after the birthday celebration for Dr. King, thousands did stand up. They wore brightly colored shirts that read "#DROP THE SUIT."

That probably will not happen, but now it is crystal clear who is on their side.

