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School choice suit grave threat for Blacks

By Kenneth A. Duke



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The Black community throughout South Florida needs to be fully aware of a grave threat that could be catastrophic for our children. That threat is a lawsuit the Florida teachers union filed to kill the Florida tax credit scholarship.

For those of you not familiar with the program, it is a difference maker and a

life changer. It is helping 30,000 students in South Florida live up to their God-given potential.

All of the students are low-income. More than 9,000 are Black. More than 15,000 are Hispanic. The vast majority of them were doing poorly in public schools. Thanks to the scholarship, they are now in schools that put them back on track to success.

All the scholarship does is give low-income parents the same privileges that parents of means have always had to take advantage of educational options for their children. More than ever, we understand that when it comes to children and education, one size does not fit all. We need a diversity of learning options to match the diversity of our society.

The tax credit scholarship is the only option set aside for low-income children. Not coincidentally, it's the only one being sued by the union. Even though a judge in Leon County ruled against the lawsuit last year, the union appealed and said it will take it all the way to the Florida Supreme Court.

Personally, I understand what it's like to grow up in poverty and struggle in school, because that was me. I had learning disabilities. I had anger issues. In 2003, we started New Jerusalem Christian Academy, because we wanted a school that would help our children avoid the pitfalls that I

experienced.

Our school serves 120 students in grades K-6. We have small class sizes. We emphasize character education and discipline. We offer chapel once a week. Our students are dealing with so many challenges, it helps tremendously to be able to offer them counseling, both secular and spiritual.

Our students could not attend without the scholarship. It's worth \$5,677 this year, about half what it costs taxpayers to educate the same child in a public school. Yet all the evidence shows scholarship students are making solid progress in their new schools, and that the program isn't hurting public schools financially or otherwise.

The truth is, it would hurt public schools if the lawsuit succeeds. More than 20,000 scholarship students are in Miami-Dade. More than 6,000 are in Broward. If those students were ordered back into public schools, there would be major costs and major disruptions. Our students would suffer the most.

I want to be clear: I support public schools. My children went to public and private schools. Most of the students at New Jerusalem Christian Academy will go to public and private schools. We partner with the school district on tutoring and other programs. I appreciate how much Dade, Broward and other districts have expanded choices within public schools. But supporting the tax credit scholarships is not anti-public school. No matter how many times opponents say it, this is not about public schools vs. private schools. This is about giving our children every opportunity to escape the vicious cycles that engulf too many of them.

Please go to www.saveourscholarships.com and www.flvoicesforchoices.org to learn more about the lawsuit. It is vital that we all keep track of what's happening with the suit, and that we all get involved with efforts to fight it.

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