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## Black pastors to NAACP: Drop out of school choice suit

A hundred of the Florida's leading African-American pastors are calling on the Florida NAACP to drop out of a lawsuit that threatens to remove 78,000 underprivileged schoolchildren from private schools that are helping them succeed.

The African American Ministers Alliance for Parental Choice announced the petition at a May 10 press conference in Tallahassee. It comes in response to a lawsuit, filed by the Florida Teachers Union in 2014, that seeks to abolish the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, now the nation's largest private school choice program. The NAACP joined the union as a plaintiff in the case, along with two other groups, representing elected school boards and school principals, who have since withdrawn.

"We see no principled reason to fight an education program that is targeted exclusively at low-income children and has a 14-year track record of helping Black students succeed," the petition states.

At the press conference, Rev. R.B. Holmes, a lifelong member of the NAACP and pastor of Bethel Missionary Baptist Church in Tallahassee, was more direct. "My great organization," he said, "is on the wrong side of history on this."

The petition drew signatures from 101 prominent ministers and more than 5,100 others who registered online. From Broward and Dade

counties, the signatures included those of: Pastor Kenneth Duke of New Jerusalem Baptist Church in Miami, Bishop Victor Curry of New Birth Baptist Church in Miami, Bishop Clarence E. Glover of Mount Bethel Baptist Church in Fort Lauderdale, and Pastor Mark Coates of Grace of God Baptist Church in Miami.

In an interview with Politico Florida, Florida NAACP president Adora Obi Nweze defended her participation by arguing the scholarship program helped some students at the expense of others. "It is in our founding principles of the NAACP that every child should have access to a quality education – not 5 percent of the children, not 10 percent of the children, but 100 percent of the children," she told Politico.

Holmes disagreed, arguing it would be "un-American" and "unjust" to evict low-income boys and girls from their schools.

Pastor Coates of Grace Baptist Church in Miami said he supports the public school system, but parents deserve a choice. "They may not have the money that others might have, but they live in America and they should have the right to choose where they want to send their children."

Howard Fuller, past president of the national Black Alliance for Educational Options and former superintendent of Milwaukee public schools, agreed: "While people work inside the public school system to make it better, we need to give parents other options."

Cheryl Joseph, a single mother from Tampa with three daughters on the scholarship, said lower-income families need the same options as well-off families.

Joseph said she was confused as to why the NAACP would sue a program helping economically disadvantaged children. "It almost feels like a betrayal," she said in an interview. "My girls are thriving. I'm so happy that I actually had the choice as to where my kids can go to school."

The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program provides scholarships to more than 78,000 economically disadvantaged children, including more than 23,000 Black students throughout Florida. Years of test data show the students were typically the lowest performers in their prior public schools, but are now, in their new schools, making the same annual

academic gains as students of all income levels nationally. The scholarships are funded by private corporate donations. Donors receive a 100 percent tax credit for their contribution.

In August 2014, the NAACP joined the Florida Education Association, League of Women Voters and others in a legal challenge to shut down the scholarship program.

In May 2015, a Leon County Circuit Court judge dismissed the suit, ruling the plaintiffs failed to demonstrate that the scholarship program harmed public schools. The union appealed that decision to the First District Court of Appeal, which heard arguments in the case on the same day as the press conference. A three-judge panel heard the appeal, and a decision is expected within the next few months. The union has vowed to take the case all the way to the Florida Supreme Court.



Reverend R.B. Holmes joined 100 ministers from all over the state Tuesday in calling for the NAACP and Florida teachers union to drop the lawsuit.