

SCLC backs private school vouchers

Lawmaker addresses thousands at Capitol rally supporting Tax Credit Scholarship.

State Rep. James Bush III, D-Miami, is the acting president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He delivered these comments to a March 24 rally in Tallahassee of some 5,500 supporters of legislation that would expand the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program, which allows low-income families to send their children to private schools. Corporations receive a tax credit for contributing to the program.

I stand before you today not as a legislator but as a messenger.

I am here to bring you the word of an organization that was born a half-century ago when a dignified woman in Montgomery, Ala., named Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus to a white man.

Those of you who know your history



**JAMES
BUSH III**

lessons will know that the resulting boycott helped to change the course of this nation and led to the creation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. You also know that the SCLC was the embodiment of the ideals of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who was its founding president.

Dr. King once said that the true goal of education was to build both intelligence and character, and that is why we are here today. We are here because we

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know that true liberation is not just about changing laws but about lifting minds. We know that our children can and must do better in school, and that something has to change if they are going to live Dr. King's dream.

In Florida today, we suffer a gap of academic achievement that is incomprehensible — a gap that means a black student is twice as likely as a white to drop out and only three-fourths as likely to graduate, a gap that finds more than half of black students in Florida last year reading below their grade level.

I say to every one of you in this amazing audience

today — to the students, the parents, the teachers and the activists — we are going to change that.

What I see here today is a will that can't be defeated. I see confidence and commitment. I see a Tax Credit Scholarship that has stimulated and motivated you, and I dearly hope my friends in these buildings behind you understand all that.

I hope that people get that this is not about public schools versus private schools. This is about reading and writing and diplomas and degrees. This is about finding the place where every single student learns the best. This is about fulfilling that very American promise of equal educational opportunity.

It is no coincidence that the first African-American to live in the White House

is a man with an Ivy League degree, and just last summer President Obama made a powerful point about our history. "There's a reason," our president said, "the story of the civil rights movement was written in our schools. There's a reason," he said, "that Thurgood Marshall took up the cause of Linda Brown. There's a reason," he said, "why the Little Rock Nine defied a governor and a mob."

It's because, (he) told us, there is no stronger weapon against inequality and no better path to opportunity than an education that can unlock a child's God-given potential. I say to you today that the Tax Credit Scholarship program is one of the keys we use to unlock that potential. It is one way we can reach some of those

children who go to bed hungry at night. It is one way we show that an empty pocketbook doesn't have to mean an empty bookshelf — that all our learning tools need to be on the table for all our children.

I am here today as a messenger of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and I am here to proudly proclaim that the organization created by Dr. King believes that a scholarship for low-income children is one way to break the cycle and close the gap. I am here, standing before this inspiring sea of hopeful faces, to announce that the Southern Christian Leadership Conference endorses Tax Credit Scholarships and endorses the bill this year that will expand them. This is our future.

BACKGROUND

Bills are advancing through both houses of the Legislature relating to the program that gives businesses tax credits for donating to a private school program for low-income children.

The measure would add sellers of beer, wine and liquor to the list of businesses and also increases the value of the vouchers. It cleared the Senate by a vote of 27-11 on March 24 and has passed one committee in the House. The program is the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship. The voucher amount is currently about 57.5 percent of state per-pupil funding, or \$3,950, in private school tuition assistance. The legislation would increase that amount by about \$170 for the next school year. That amount would be allowed to climb by 25 percent whenever the tax credits approved the previous year reach or exceed 90 percent of the cap. Over time, it would increase to about 80 percent of the per-pupil allowance.

The voucher program is supported by credits businesses can get against their corporate income taxes and insurance premium taxes for every dollar they donate to the program.

The bill, SB 2126, would add credits for alcoholic beverage and gas and oil severance taxes as well as a form of sales tax paid by some businesses.

It also would raise a \$118 million cap on the program to \$140 million during the budget year starting July 1 and allow for automatic increases after that if the program raises at least 90 percent of the capped amount in a given year.

There are 27,600 students in the program attending 1,020 private and parochial schools statewide.

Tribune research, The Associated Press