

FLORIDA



Opinion

Teachers Union Lawsuit Threatens Our Students, Our Community

By Suzette Dean

When my husband Daniel and I started our school in East Tampa 17 years ago, we wanted to create a beacon of hope in the midst of struggle. Most of the students who came to Bible Truth Ministries Academy were two grades behind in their previous schools. Some had been told they weren't capable of learning.

One by one, we lifted them up. Now, our test scores show, many of them are actually learning *above* their grade level. I can point with pride to my two oldest children, both of them graduates of our school. My daughter, who plans to be a lawyer, started at the University of South Florida last year, while my son will start working towards an engineering degree at USF this spring.

I do not mention these things to boast, but to bring awareness to a lawsuit that threatens real harm to our students.

Two years ago, the teachers union, the NAACP and other groups filed the suit to kill the Florida tax credit scholarship program. The scholarship serves more than 95,000 students this year, including 48 at our school. It allows low-income and working-class parents to find the schools that work best for their children, just like parents with more money do all the time. But if the lawsuit wins, those students will be evicted from the schools they love, and returned to schools where we know, from

the test data, that many of them were the lowest performers.

This is crazy. There is nothing about this program that in any way harms public schools, despite what the teachers union says, over and over again. That's why every single study that has looked at the cost question has determined the program does not drain money from public schools. That's why the first two courts to look at the lawsuit dismissed it.

Despite the rulings, the teachers union and the NAACP are keeping the lawsuit alive.

In September, they asked the Florida Supreme Court to consider an appeal.

Next week, the state and the parents fighting the suit will file their response. In the meantime, everybody who cares about East Tampa and communities like it need to know this is going on. And they need to be asking, "Why?"

How in the world did a program that gives more options to low-income children get twisted into a negative? How did a school like ours become the enemy?

We are helping children in our community find the path to success. In our school, they are learning the academic skills they need to eventually become lawyers and engineers. But we don't stop there. They also learn how to cook and sew; how to fix a lawn mower or refrigerator, if need be; how to shake hands and keep eye contact during

conversations. Oh, they can play a mean game of chess, too. We have a wall of championship trophies to prove it.

But our help isn't limited to "our" students. A few years ago, we worked with alumni at Middleton High, right across the street, to set up a free tutoring program at Bible Truth for students who were struggling at the high school. Our staff worked hand in hand with others in the community to give 25 to 40 students a day extra assistance.

We never saw a line between public school students and private school students. We saw students in our community who needed help, period. And we gave it to them.

I am a Christian woman, so I am choosing my words carefully. But I have to say, I am especially upset with the NAACP's involvement with this lawsuit. The scholarship program is helping black students, in the black community. So why is the NAACP trying to kill it? Again, the word that comes to mind is, "Crazy."

Everybody should also be aware that it's not just this one scholarship program that's in jeopardy. Similar programs that benefit our community are just as vulnerable to these kinds of legal attacks, if not more so.

By that I mean programs like the McKay Scholarship, which serves students with disabilities, and VPK. We also have McKay and VPK students at Bible Truth, and I know we are not alone. If this lawsuit succeeds, do you think the people behind it will stop there?

Suzette Dean is the principal of Bible Truth Ministries Academy.