School choice is about freedom

On the day after his father’s birthday last year, Martin Luther King III stood near the Florida Capitol and addressed 10,000 people, mostly of color, who had gathered from all over the state.

They were there to rally against the lawsuit the state teachers had filed to kill the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, which has been saving thousands of our most struggling children for 15 years.

“This is about freedom,” King told them. “The freedom to choose what’s best for your family, and your child most importantly.”

I recall King’s words now whenever I hear opponents repeat their distortions and while we all wait for the Florida Supreme Court to determine whether it will hear the union’s appeal.

This week’s opinion column by Julie Delegal is a prime example.

No, the scholarship does not drain money from public schools.

The scholarship is worth $5,886 — about 60 percent of the cost to educate the same child in public school.

That’s why eight independent studies found it saves taxpayer money that can be reinvested in public schools, and no study has found otherwise.

That’s why both courts that have reviewed the lawsuit have dismissed it, saying the union did not back its claims of harm to public schools.

SELECTIVE OUTRAGE

The reality is, public schools will be hurt financially if the union wins.

There are 98,000 students on scholarship, 7,000 in Duval.

How will the district absorb 7,000 students all at once? What zoning lines will it move? How many schools will it build?

Again, the value of the scholarship is far less than the cost to educate the same student in public school.

Will opponents ask the Legislature for more money to support these students after telling the public for years that returning them to public schools would save money? Is that when these myths about money draining will finally be exposed?

Opponents are selective when it comes to targeting school choice programs.

Delegal says tax credit scholarships violate separation of church and state while dodging how McKay Scholarships, a choice program for students with disabilities, do not.

She and her husband support a private school that accepts McKay. Sixty percent of the 30,000 students who use that scholarship attend faith-based schools.

And unlike the tax credit scholarship, which is funded by corporate contributions, McKay is funded by taxpayers.

If the tax credit scholarship is unconstitutional, so is McKay and so is Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten, Bright Futures college scholarships and Gardner Scholarship for students with autism, Down syndrome and other special needs.

SINGLING OUT LOW-INCOME PARENTS

All of them allow parents to use taxpayer money to send children to private, faith-based institutions.

If you follow the opponents’ other legal arguments, other choice programs would be at risk, too, including charter schools, magnet schools and IB programs. So why aren’t opponents trying to kill them, too?

They singled out the only choice program that exclusively serves low-income and working-class students.

And it’s not a coincidence.

They knew if they attacked those other programs, parents with money and connections would fight back. They didn’t think low-income parents would, just like they don’t think low-income parents are capable of determining whether their children are getting a good education.

At last year’s rally, MLK III channeled what he thought his father would say about the lawsuit and the parents who have risen up against it.

“I know that he always stood up for justice,” he said, “and this is an issue of justice.”

Yes, it is.

And even a mountain of misleading columns won’t obscure that fact.

Bishop Vaughn McLaughlin is senior pastor of The Potter’s House International Ministries and co-founder of The Potter’s House Academy. The school serves 344 students with tax credit scholarships and 36 VPK students.