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# The Orlando Times

Your Key to Florida's African-American Community

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## Bill, HB 1009, To Help Costs Of Education

The state scholarship that is helping African-American parents take charge of their children's education needs to be expanded and made more affordable. A bill by Rep. Will Weatherford would do both, and it deserves the support of all legislators this year.

The bill, HB 1009, would make significant improvements to the eight-year-old Florida Tax Credit Scholarship. This program is aimed at students on free or reduced lunch, and this year 27,600 economically disadvantaged children are taking advantage by attending 1,020 private schools throughout the state. In Orange County alone, the scholarship is helping nearly 2,500 students attend schools such as Agape Christian Academy, Kingsway Christian Academy, Heritage Preparatory School and Academie Chretienne Haitienne D'Orlando.

One problem is that the maximum annual scholarship, \$3,950, has fallen so far beyond the actual tuition that the gap between the two is pricing low-income families out of the program. There is room for reasonable growth in the amount, because the current scholarship is only a third the total cost of a student who attends public schools and is by far the lowest-cost education option. Why is it that the only choice program targeted for underprivileged children spends the least?

Rep. Weatherford's bill would reduce the gap by increasing the scholarship over four years to the point where it ends up at four-fifths of the basic operational formula for public schools. That translates to about half the total amount spent per-student in public schools.

This bill also includes two stringent



accountability measures that are necessary to ensure that students continue to get the best education possible. One requires that individual schools on the program reveal their standardized test score gains for scholarship students, and the other requires schools with at least \$250,000 in scholarship money to file a financial report.

We have seen the ways these private schools in the Orlando area have been able to connect with students and, in many cases, turn around the educational careers. Justina and Shauna Mason are two such examples. These twins graduated last summer as co-valedictorians at Agape Christian with perfect 4.0 grade point averages and headed off to become the first in their family to attend college. Shauna said at the time that the school had a personal touch that kept them on track. "I ask a lot of questions," she said, "and the teachers really break it

down for you. If you have trouble with something, they will be there to help you."

This scholarship is not an indictment of the many fine public schools that help low-income students of color to succeed, but it is an option that is both necessary and welcome. Rev. H.K. Matthews, a Florida civil rights icon who marched with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., has become a visible champion of the program, and he recently wrote that: "I now dedicate my efforts to what I believe is a natural extension of the civil-rights movement: equal educational opportunities for all children, regardless of socioeconomic status."

Rev. Matthews is right on target, and we urge all lawmakers to join to support HB 1009. These poor and sometimes struggling schoolchildren deserve all the options we can provide them.