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Symposium reveals real face of school-choice advocates

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Guest columnist

Only 76 miles separate my Tampa office and The Peabody Orlando, where the Black Alliance for Educational Options held its annual symposium last week. But my Corolla must have hit a black hole on I-4, because I landed on another planet.



Matus

I didn't see anybody from the American Legislative Exchange Council on Planet BAEO. But at lunch, I did sit next to a sad-eyed Kentucky woman whose grandson recently graduated from high school unable to read.

I didn't see anybody itching to privatize public schools. But I did learn about Papa Dallas, a black man whose eyes were burned out as a slave because he was caught learning the alphabet.

I didn't see the Koch Brothers. But I did see an image of black men hanging dead from a tree while a crowd of white people loitered.

What I saw was a fiery political voice for educational reform, and it was nothing like the political narrative we so often read. The symposium drew 650 people from 20 states, including 50 current and former elected officials, the vast majority Democrats. I heard them talking parental empowerment, black empowerment, equal opportunity. I heard passion, frustration and desperation. If it was all a front for profiteers, then BAEO orchestrated more actors than Star Wars.

"I've been told that I'm being duped," said Sharhonda Bossier, a former New York public school teacher who helps lead Families for Excellent Schools. "I've been told that I have an interest in undermining the black middle class. I'm like, 'Are you looking at me?'"

Leon Gaither, a former Orlando public school teacher whose wife still teaches in district schools, said the two slowly came around to the value of parental school choice. "We've seen the fallout from the system that doesn't take into account different ways kids learn," he said.

Throughout the symposium, I found myself wishing it were being piped into the homes of school choice opponents — to Democratic lawmakers, to groups like Fund Education Now and Parents Across

America, to those who portray supporters as right-wing zealots bent on raiding public education. These are the privatizers you're talking about?

I wish they could have heard BAEO chairman Howard Fuller. He addressed an orientation session with remarks that were a lot more Malcolm X than Milton Friedman.

It was Fuller who put up the image of the lynching. He riffed on Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman and a Georgia law that once mandated whippings for any black person caught teaching another black person to read. He rolled through *Brown v. Board of Education*, the 1960s book "Black Rage," and the sit-in at a Woolworth's counter by North Carolina A&T students.

"It hurts my soul to know that on Feb. 1, 1960, four students from A&T sat down at a lunch counter and demanded to be served," Fuller said, "And in 2013, four black students sit down at a lunch counter where they are welcome and can't read the menu."

"You know who that's on? That's on us. That's not white people, white people, white people. ... We allowed this to happen to our children."

During one session, a parent who participated in turnaround efforts in Adelanto, Calif., described trying every possible way to get help for her child, a special education student stuck in a classroom with a teacher who had lost control. Nothing worked. Then a school official — perhaps tired of feeling helpless, too — told her about the parent trigger law. "We finally saw hope when we had none," she said.

She stopped to wipe away tears.

Her palpable anguish made me reflect on how the parent trigger is typically described in political debate here. A heavily trafficked Facebook page calls the Florida effort part of "ALEC-Peddled Parent Trigger bills that support corporate welfare not parents or children!" A major South Florida newspaper calls it a "weapon in the scheme to privatize public education."

There's nothing extraordinary about these lines. They're repeated every day.

But after the BAEO Symposium, it's even easier to see who's really on another planet.

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