Tax-credit lawsuit threatens
dream of equal opportunity

BY BISHOP VICTOR T. CURRY

In his historic speech on the Washington Mall, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. urged us to come together as diverse citizens to ensure that all of us — regardless of our station or status — had the chance to enjoy the opportunity this country can offer.

So it seems an especially cruel irony that, on the anniversary of that speech, on Aug. 28, a lawsuit was filed asking the courts to shut down the Florida tax credit scholarship program for low-income children. This program is one — and I emphasize just one — tool we must use to realize the dream described in Dr. King’s speech.

It is hard to find anyone who would disagree that our poor and minority children are facing an educational crisis. Despite tremendous progress in the past decade, we are still seeing graduation rates for African-American students under 60 percent. For boys, it’s even lower.

I have the highest praise for our public school teachers and administrators. Their task is almost inconceivably difficult, and their results are truly heroic. But here in Miami-Dade, we have a student population of incredible diversity — more than 100 languages are spoken in our public schools — and an economic diversity of staggering proportions. Expecting all children to thrive in a school assigned to them by their ZIP code is just not realistic, even with the best teachers.

Some children will only thrive in a different environment. Children are not “uniform,” to borrow a word used in a brittle manner in this lawsuit, and the way each one of them will learn best isn’t either. Some kids will thrive at Northwestern High School — and not just football players. We never hear about its award-winning choir, and we don’t hear about how the school sends kids to the Ivy League every year. But for some kids, their assigned school won’t be a good fit.

We need magnets, charters, virtual schooling, dual enrollment with colleges — and, yes, some low-income children will need a private, even faith-based school like the one my ministry runs.

The Dr. John A. McKinney Christian Academy (JAMCA) serves 120 children on the scholarship program, scholarships that are worth $5,272 and cover the cost of the student’s tuition, books, and even some school supplies such as T-shirts and planners. In turn, these scholarships allow our families to use their limited incomes to put food on the table and turn on the lights. At JAMCA, our focus is on educating and preparing these children for life, and not just for a test.

The point is that different kinds of children respond to different kinds of schools. So we — and the courts — should be seeking “uniformity” of opportunity, not “uniformity” of delivery.

This scholarship program serves who it was intended to serve. The average income of its families is only $25,000 for a household of four. More than two-thirds of the children are black or Hispanic. A majority are from single-parent homes.

The program is working. We know this because the children must take standardized tests approved by the state, and the results are sent to a state-selected researcher at Northwestern University each year. What the research shows is that these children are among the worst performers in their public schools when they leave for the program. Once on the program, they make learning gains equal to all children of all incomes, including wealthy ones. Best of all, they found that the more a public school had kids use the program, the higher the learning gains for the children who remained at the public school.

The program is helping the poor children in the program and in public schools. In 2010, more than 5,500 people came to Tallahassee to support this program — and over 1,000 of them slept on buses over-night to do so. I can imagine tens of thousands who would come to the steps of the state Supreme Court should it be asked to evict 70,000 low-income children from schools chosen by their parents.

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if, instead of that march, we had a different one: one where everyone who is concerned about the educational achievement of our low-income children converged on the Capitol to affirm our support for our public schools, but also affirm our support for this program. That’s my dream.

Bishop Victor T. Curry leads the New Birth Baptist Church in Miami, which includes the Dr. John A. McKinney Christian Academy.