

State scholarship issues bring back memories of Selma

The Rev. H.K. Matthews

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I recently went to see the movie "Selma," which I was eager to do. I participated in the first march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge on March 7, 1965. The film certainly brought back many memories for me, and reminded me why that march holds such a prominent place in our

nation's history.

Though some of my memories are painful, I have not forgotten what we marched for. We marched to gain many specific things — the right to cast a vote, or the right eat at any restaurant we wanted (at least any one that we could afford). But in essence we marched for empowerment.

However, watching the movie wasn't the first time I had a flashback to the Selma march. Forty-five years later, I was invited to lead another march, this one in Tallahassee. Families who participate in Florida's tax credit scholarship program were urged to come to our state's distant capital to show legislators how strongly they supported the program. Incredibly, nearly 6,000 people showed up — that's roughly 10 times the number who marched across that Selma bridge. Over 1,000 people slept on buses overnight to be there. They came to celebrate their own empowerment — the ability to choose the best school for their children.

The scholarship is but one of many school choice programs in Florida — this year roughly one third of Florida K-12 students who are funded by the taxpayers will attend someplace other than their zoned district school. The tax credit scholarship program doesn't use taxpayer money — it's funded by private donations from companies, who in turn receive a tax credit. But it empowers low-income families to make a choice.

This year, almost 70,000 children use the program

to attend a school chosen by their parents. The average income of these families is \$24,000, and over 70 percent are minorities. Research of their test scores shows that the program draws the worst performers from our public schools, and they show solid gains once they find a school that's a better fit. Just as encouraging, this research shows the program is helping improve the academic performance of the public schools.

Despite these positive results, last August the Florida teachers union and the Florida School Boards Association filed a lawsuit asking the courts to shut the program down, and evict the 70,000 children from their chosen schools.

When I heard about the lawsuit, I had another flashback to the old movement. The parallels were striking to me. Here were citizens demanding empowerment. A march symbolized that demand. And here were powerful groups trying to deny it.

I suppose that this lawsuit will eventually end up in the Florida Supreme Court. One thing I'm fairly sure of: If nearly 6,000 people showed up just to demonstrate that they supported the program, how many will come if the most important thing to them — their right to choose the best school for their children — is threatened to be taken away?

Watching "Selma," and looking back, I feel that those of us who marched across that bridge prevailed in the end. Will these scholarship parents of little means prevail against those trying to away take their right to choose? Let's pray that it be so.

The Rev. H.K. Matthews is a longtime civil-rights leader in Florida. His autobiography, "Victory After the Fall," was published in 2007. A park in Pensacola is named after him.