Education is key to community’s blueprint

LuTimothy May
VIEWPOINT

My father, Theophasis May, was an architect and a builder. He knew the importance of a strong foundation and clear blueprints for the future. When building a community, he understood the need for cornerstones serving our social, civic, religious, and educational needs.

So I was overjoyed when I heard last month that Leon Circuit Judge George Reynolds dismissed a lawsuit against the 14-year-old Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program. Our prayers were answered. The scholarship program was saved for the 70,000 low-income students across the state who depend on it, and we could continue to use that program to heal cracks in our own community’s foundation.

To hear now that the Florida teachers union is appealing the decision to a higher court, even after two other public education groups dropped out of the lawsuit, is like a fist in my gut. That’s what happened as the Florida Education Association appealed the judge’s ruling to the 1st District Court of Appeal. The action came just a week after the Florida School Boards Association withdrew and a month after the Florida Association of School Administrators withdrew from the suit.

I believe the union leaders are all good people, but they are misinformed. If they could sit with me in the living rooms of families in this community and hear what I hear, and see what I see, I believe they would change their minds.

Our community is one of the most depressed in Escambia County. The divide between the have and have-nots may be greater here than anywhere in Florida. Poverty, crime, incarceration and dropout rates are all high.

But our love for each other and our community’s future are also high. Ensuring our children have a solid education, whether it be from a public or a private school, is part of our blueprint for a better, stronger community.

Last year, the parents of 1.5 million preK-12 students in Florida exercised their right to choose schools for their children other than the ones assigned to them by their school districts. We must ensure all parents, regardless of their income level, are afforded that same right.

Escambia provides some great public school options for students. But sometimes parents cannot afford to transport their children to distant schools. At other times the school is just not the right fit for the child.

This is why I believe we must make all sorts of educational opportunities available to economically disadvantaged children, including scholarships to attend private schools.

The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program is a beacon of light for impoverished students struggling in public school. The program creates meaningful education options for those with little means.

More than 1,000 of Escambia’s low-income students take advantage of the scholarship. At our school, Dixon Christian Academy, 74 of the 84 students enroll with the financial support of this scholarship.

Dixon provides a warm, nurturing and safe environment for young minds to grow. Without the scholarships many of these students will return to schools that may not work best for them.

This scholarship program is creating a legacy of success that is strengthening the foundations our community needs to build a better future. But it is not something we can do alone. I believe we must become partners with our public schools, so I applaud the school boards for trying to end this needless legal battle.

If the teachers union would only sit with our families and listen, they might come to believe that too.

Rev. LuTimothy May is the pastor of Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church and co-founder of Dixon Christian Academy in Pensacola.

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