

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 20, 2016

TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

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Thousands of people, from all over Florida, take to Duval Street in downtown Tallahassee on Tuesday to rally in support of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship.

Teachers urged: End voucher suit

Thousands of private school students rally with MLK III, religious leaders in support of Fla. Tax Credit Scholarship

JAMES CALL DEMOCRAT CAPITOL REPORTER

Thousands of private school students rallied Tuesday in Tallahassee to protect their scholarships.

Rally organizers said a convoy of 242 buses brought 10,500 people from across the state to Tallahassee to urge a teachers union to drop a lawsuit against the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship. The 15-year-old program provides low-income families with corporate-funded vouchers to attend private schools.

“We won’t go down without a fight,” Bishop Victor Curry of Miami’s New Birth Baptist Church told a crowd gathered between the state Capitol and the Supreme Court.

“Our fight is about equal education opportunity. It’s a fight about education freedom — our children deserve a quality education,” said Curry, who served as the rally’s master of



Martin Luther King III speaks to the Tallahassee crowd rallying in support of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship on Tuesday.

See Rally, Page 6A

Rally

Continued from Page 1A

ceremonies.

The Florida Education Association, the state's largest teachers union, is fighting the program's constitutionality in court. Martin Luther King III joined with religious leaders — many affiliated with schools that accept the tax credit vouchers — to call on the FEA to drop the lawsuit.

King said support for a voucher program is not a statement against public schools. "What is being said is that people and families need options. One option cannot work," he said.

The eldest son of Dr. Martin Luther King compared the fight for school choice to the civil rights struggle led by his father. He said the scholarships are the only way many families can afford a private school and questioned the "gall" of a society that argues about the cost to educate children.

"We would not be having any debate if we were talking about building a new missile," King said. "We spend billions of dollars on death and destruction and we have a different discussion when we're talking about life and preservation of life."

Tammy Brockmeier, enrollment coordinator at Tallahassee's John Paul II High School, marched along the route from the Tucker Civic Center to the rally's stage at Duval and Madison streets. Brockmeier said 25 percent of the Catholic high school's students use vouchers to pay tuition.

Paul Bryant of Deland and his two daughters, a second-grader and a seventh-grader, rode on a bus for five hours to attend the rally. Bryant said school choice is a fundamental right.



JOE RONDONE/DEMOCRAT

An estimated 11,000 people rallied in downtown Tallahassee in support of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship on Tuesday.

"Giving citizens the right to choose where their kids go to school is the most constitutional thing there is," said Bryant, an administrator at Lighthouse Christian Preparatory Academy in Deland.

Students are eligible for a \$5,700 scholarship if they are assigned to an underperforming public school and their family income is no more than 185 percent of the federal poverty level — \$43,500 for a family of four.

Though speakers urged the nearly 11,000 people at the rally to shout "drop the suit" loud enough to be heard in Mi-

ami, the FEA said no, the court fight will continue.

President Joanne McCall questioned the scholarship supporters' fear in letting a judge decide the constitutional issues the program raises.

"What are they so afraid of going to the courts to ensure this voucher scheme is legal?" McCall asked. "Let's let the courts decide this once and for all."

Nearly 80,000 children attend about 1,600 private schools on a tax-credit scholarship or voucher.

Leon County Judge George Reynolds ruled last May that the FEA lacked

standing to sue because the state does not provide public dollars to the program. Corporations make donations to a private entity that provides the scholarships. The state then gives the corporations a dollar-for-dollar tax credit on corporate income, sales and other taxes.

The FEA calls the program a scheme to siphon public dollars from public schools. It has argued the \$550 million the state has set aside for the program could be used to improve public schools and is appealing Reynolds' ruling.

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