

NAACP should back low-income parents on school choice issue



R.B. Holmes

MY VIEW

Giving disadvantaged parents the power to send their children to schools of their choice is not just educationally right. It is morally right. I will always stand with those parents, no matter who is aligned against them.

That includes the NAACP, which I love and have supported my entire life.

The NAACP is a party to the lawsuit that seeks to terminate Florida's tax credit scholarship for low-income children. If the suit succeeds, 78,000 poor children – most of them black and Hispanic – will be removed from private schools where they are thriving, and returned to public schools where they were not. This would be a monumental injustice.

Across Florida, community leaders are doing all we can to help those parents. More than 100 ministers recently formed the Florida African American Ministers' Alliance For

Parental Choice. Before the court hearing, I and other representatives called on the NAACP to drop the suit. In a matter of weeks, more than 5,000 people have signed a petition asking the same.

I am no enemy of the NAACP. I am a lifelong member, and former president of the Jacksonville chapter.

I am no enemy of public schools either. My mother was a public school teacher and teacher union member.

But the scholarship does nothing to harm public schools, or to undermine the NAACP's mission. The NAACP I know fought for equal opportunity for all boys and girls, not just those fortunate enough to live in a wealthy zip code with a high-performing public school.

Public schools do an excellent job with many children, but some children need something different to succeed. That doesn't mean a private school or charter school or magnet school is better overall. It just means that for that individual child, it is better.

Florida is a national leader in offering more educational choice, in recognizing that diversity strengthens the whole. Yet the legal rationale behind the NAACP's suit jeopardizes

some of those other options.

Voluntary Pre-K, McKay Scholarships for students with disabilities and Bright Futures scholarships for college are all programs that use state funds. They all allow parents to send their children to private and faith-based schools. They are all vital to our communities. But if the suit against tax credit scholarships succeeds – a program not using state funds – there is nothing to keep those programs from the chopping block.

Throughout its distinguished history, the NAACP has been on the side of justice and opportunity. But it is on the wrong side here, and I pray it will reconsider its position.

In the meantime, I stand with Martin Luther King III, who addressed 10,000 people at a rally for the scholarships in January. And I stand with many local NAACP leaders and members who I know are at odds with the Florida chapter on school choice.

Above all, I stand with our parents and our children. They deserve every opportunity we can give them to fulfill their dreams.

R.B. Holmes is pastor of Bethel Missionary Baptist Church, which is affiliated with Bethel Christian Academy.