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Contact: Emily Allman
(850) 222-1996
emily@sachsmedia.com

10,000 Tell Union: Don't Take Opportunity from Our Children; "Rally in Tally" to Protect Florida's Tax Credit Scholarship

TALLAHASSEE, FLA. – In one of the largest education and civil rights demonstrations in Florida history, more than 10,000 parents, students and teachers gathered in Tallahassee Tuesday to save Florida's Tax Credit Scholarship, the nation's largest private school choice program.

The "Rally in Tally," keynoted by Martin Luther King III, called on the state teachers union to immediately end its misguided effort to take scholarships from nearly 80,000 low-income children, two thirds of them black and Hispanic.

"There should not be a one-size-fits-all approach to education in America. Every parent deserves the choice to help set his or her child firmly on a brighter course," said Martin Luther King III, son of the late Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. "A child's zip code should not determine his or her educational opportunity."

The Florida Education Association filed suit in 2014, and is now appealing a judge's ruling that it has no standing and that its claims of harm to public schools are merely "speculative." The state of Florida supports five privately operated educational options, but the union targeted the 15-year-old tax credit scholarship, the only one that exclusively serves low-income students.

"From Pensacola to Jacksonville to Orlando to Miami, the scholarship has opened thousands of doors of opportunity, and put thousands of low-income children on the path to success," said Julio Fuentes, president and CEO of the Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options. "It is unconscionable that anybody would want to end a program that is doing so much good for so many. We and the parents here today will not go back to the days when income and zip code determine a child's fate."

Students like Valentin Mendez are among the beneficiaries of the program.

Valentin's mother, Jeannette Ruiz, got a scholarship for him five years ago after he was bullied relentlessly in public school and began failing. The scholarship enabled him to enroll at La Progresiva Presbyterian School, which opened in Miami in 1971 after being shut down by Fidel Castro in Cuba. Now a junior at La Progresiva, Valentin is making straight A's, planning to go to a college, and setting his sights on becoming a doctor or businessman.

“The scholarship changed Valentin’s life and made his future bright,” said Mrs. Ruiz, a gas station employee who spoke at the rally with Valentin. “We don’t understand why the teachers union would want to take away something that helped our son live out his dreams. If Valentin loses his scholarship, it will be devastating to him and to our family.”

“If the union wins this lawsuit, tens of thousands of students will be taken out of schools that are working for them and will be sent back to schools that weren’t,” said civil rights leader Rev. H.K. Matthews, who participated in the first march in 1963 across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma. “Today, great obstacles block low-income children from reaching their potential. Too many remain handcuffed by income and zip code to schools that may not be best for them. That’s not a dig at public schools, or the heroic educators working in them. It’s simply recognition that a school just right for one child may be all wrong for another.”

Other rally speakers included Bishop Victor Curry of New Birth Baptist Church in Miami, a former president of the Miami-Dade NAACP; and Rev. R.B. Holmes of Tallahassee, past president of the National Baptist Congress of Christian Education.

A cornerstone of Florida’s educational choice initiatives, the Florida Legislature established the Tax Credit Scholarship to provide low-income parents the opportunity to find schools that work best for their children. The average family income for a scholarship student is 7 percent above poverty. Test data shows the students were by and large the lowest performers in their prior public schools, but are now making solid progress in their new schools.

No direct state budget dollars are used to support the scholarships. Instead, corporations receive dollar-for-dollar tax credits in return for contributions to state-approved scholarship funding organizations.

About Save Our Scholarships

The rally featured members of the Save Our Scholarships Coalition, formed to protect the futures of Florida’s disadvantaged students and the rights of parents to choose the best school for their children. The statewide group is calling on Florida’s teachers union and its allies to #DropTheSuit attacking the scholarship program. The Coalition includes representation from the following organizations:

- The Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO)
- The Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options (HCREO), which includes more than 100 Hispanic ministers opposed to the lawsuit
- American Federation For Children
- Agudath Israel of Florida
- The Florida Black Ministers Parental Choice Alliance, a group of more than 100 Florida ministers who are opposed to the lawsuit
- The Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America

For more information, please visit www.saveourscholarships.com.

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FOR MORE ON WHAT PARENTS ARE SAYING THROUGHOUT THE STATE OF FLORIDA, REFER TO THE BELOW:

NORTHEAST FLORIDA	PARENT	CONTACT	QUOTE
JACKSONVILLE	Phyllis Thomas	(904) 955-1803	<p>Jordan Thomas is among the beneficiaries of the scholarship program.</p> <p>Her mother, Phyllis Thomas, wanted an alternative to public schools for her younger children after watching her eldest daughter at times struggle during her education.</p> <p>Thomas and her husband, Dwight, decided The Potter's House Christian Academy in Jacksonville, part of the ministry they attend, would be a better fit for their five younger children. Then they learned it was possible through the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program.</p> <p>"The one-on-one is much better than in public school because of the smaller classroom sizes," Phyllis Thomas said. Tenth-grader Jordan, a high achiever, has become a role model for her younger siblings who range from fourth to seventh grades.</p> <p>"It's given us hope, peace of mind. I don't worry about their education," Thomas said. "I know they are going to learn above what is required of them at their school. They are going to be able to go out and shape the world."</p>
DAYTONA BEACH	Latrisha Williams	386-383-8165	<p>Students like Shalecia Williams of Flagler County are among the beneficiaries of the scholarship program.</p> <p>Her mother, Latrisha Williams, a nurse for Volusia County public schools, started</p>

seeking alternatives for her eldest child when she realized she could do better in a different school environment. She was already ahead of most of the other kindergarten students, and she wasn't being challenged, Williams said. Then, Shalecia started getting disciplined for being too talkative. Williams felt her daughter wasn't getting the most out of her education.

Shalecia enrolled in Calvary Christian Academy in Ormond Beach in the first grade, and now attends First Baptist Christian Academy in Palm Coast, where her younger siblings also attend using the scholarship, because it's closer to their home.

"They all made honor roll," Williams said proudly of the first grading period of the 2015-16 school year. "Things are really going well. I just couldn't imagine them going back to public school."

PANHANDLE PENSACOLA	PARENT	CONTACT	QUOTE
	Lynne Martinez	850-485-5966 tlcpns20@gmail.com	<p>Students like Carley Ryals are among the beneficiaries of the scholarship.</p> <p>Carley entered school with a learning disability as she struggled with reading and pronunciations. Thanks to the joint efforts of a public school speech pathologist and her teachers at St. John the Evangelist, Carley began to succeed. She's now an honor roll student and participating in the school's choir.</p> <p>"The school is a second family," said her mother, Lynne Martinez, who attended Catholic school and wanted the same experience for her children. She credits the school's strong family-oriented culture as a reason for Carley's success.</p> <p>Martinez worries how her children</p>

will fare if the lawsuit succeeds in ending the program. Martinez said her son Tyler, who is in eighth grade at St. John, would continue to do well, but she worries Carley would be overwhelmed at the local district school. "Why would anyone want her to struggle again?" she said.

TALLAHASSEE

Steven White Jr. steven_c_white@hotmail.com
352-528-6606

Students like Steven White III are among the beneficiaries of the scholarship.

After struggling due to too many distractions at a public school in Palm Beach County, Steven moved to Tallahassee to live with his father, a full-time student at Florida A&M University. Steven's father (also named Steven) said his fifth-grade son is now on the A/B honor roll at Bethel Christian Academy.

Mr. White believes his son's success at the school is due to many factors. It's family-oriented environment, small class sizes and caring educators all help him as a father set boundaries and maintain a routine geared towards learning and responsibility.

"Why, when so many children are succeeding, would you want to uproot them?" he said of the lawsuit.

NORTH CENTRAL FLORIDA

GAINESVILLE

PARENT

CONTACT

QUOTE

Ayesha Williams [352-278-1036
ms.ayesha2010@hotmail.com](mailto:ms.ayesha2010@hotmail.com)

Students like Tamani, Samaria and Azaria are among the beneficiaries of the scholarship.

Their mother, Ayesha Williams, worried the zoned neighborhood school wouldn't do enough to challenge her girls academically. She decided early on to enroll her girls in private schools with the help of the tax credit scholarship.

		<p>The choice paid off.</p> <p>Now all three are at St. Patrick Interparish School and doing well. The teachers and the principal know all the students by name, Williams said, and the school has an intimate setting that provides a good, structured environment for learning.</p> <p>“My girls need the challenge, the accountability and a distraction-free environment,” she said. “The lawsuit would take that all away.”</p>
OCALA	<p>Elsie Murillo 352-598-8318/352-854-1892 kirasoon1@yahoo.com</p>	<p>Students like Kira Murillo are among the beneficiaries of the scholarship.</p> <p>After moving to Florida from New York, Elsie Murillo discovered her daughter Kira was far behind the other students in first grade. Kira struggled to read even simple words like “cat” and felt intimidated, even bullied, by her own teacher. Schooling gave Kira anxiety until her parents enrolled her in Meadowbrook Academy with the help of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program.</p> <p>“The teachers at Meadowbrook provided her the support and attention she needed,” said Murillo. “Now she’s soaring.”</p> <p>Today Kira is an honor student and active in choir, ballet and cheerleading. After she graduates, Kira wants to continue her education and become a physical therapist. Elsie said she was furious when she heard about the lawsuit. “My child would not be where she is today without that scholarship,” she said. “They can’t take this away from these kids.”</p>
LAKE CITY	<p>Amanda Dudley 386-365-9445 adudley1113@yahoo.com</p>	<p>Students like Katie Cutford are among the beneficiaries of the scholarship program.</p> <p>Her scholarship enabled her to enroll in Lake City Christian Academy, a nondenominational private school in North Central Florida that caters to students in prekindergarten through 12th grade with diverse learning needs. Katie struggled academically and socially</p>

at her neighborhood school and fell behind while homeschooling. But at the academy, she feels like she finally hit her stride despite difficulties with juvenile glaucoma and a heart condition that causes her to occasionally pass out.

The senior, who loves to read and write, earns mostly A's and has come out of her shell, said her mom, Amanda Dudley. Her daughter also has discovered her passion: "I really want to be a teacher," said Katie, who plans to study education in the fall at Florida Gateway College.

Without assistance from the scholarship program, Katie wouldn't be able to attend the academy.

"There are many families like mine who can't afford private school," said Katie, who is attending the rally. "This program gives us a chance. Please don't take that away."

CENTRAL FLORIDA ORLANDO	PARENT	CONTACT	QUOTE
	Wideline Premilen	407-485-2655	<p>Students like Zanisha Premilen are among the beneficiaries of the scholarship program.</p> <p>Her mother, Wideline Premilen, grew fearful as her daughter got closer to her middle school years. She would drive by her daughter's assigned middle school, and her car would be pelted by rocks thrown by students. She also heard cursing, and saw students smoking and girls in revealing clothes.</p> <p>"There's no way my baby is going to her school," she would say to herself.</p> <p>But she wondered how she could ever send her Zanisha to a private school? Then she learned the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program was the answer. She was not only able to send Zanisha to Saint Andrew Catholic School in Orlando, but her kindergartner, Renayah Montas there,</p>

LAKELAND

Zanis
Ashley Elliot
(Student)

jperez@victorylakeland.org

too.

“She’s doing really well at her school now,” Wideline Premilen said. “It’s a weight off my shoulders.”

Ashley Elliot is among the beneficiaries of the scholarship program.

Born addicted to drugs and adopted by her grandmother at a young age, Ashley was heading down a similar path as her biological mom at a “last-resort” alternative public school in Polk County. But then she followed a couple of supportive administrators to a new school, Victory Christian Academy, which she could attend thanks to a tax credit scholarship.

“It’s really changed my life for the better in so many ways. Because of the scholarships, because of whatever people do to donate money, I have been able to succeed. I always thought that I was going to wind up on a bad path,” said Ashley, now 17 and in the 11th grade at Victory. “The Scholarship gave me a chance to succeed because they told me I was worth it. The scholarship and Victory have changed my life. ... Statistically speaking, I should be on drugs, be dropped out, and be pregnant or even have a baby right now. But I don’t.”

Instead, she has goals that just a few years ago she couldn’t even imagine herself thinking about.

“I grew up in the epitome of American poverty. I wouldn’t have wanted to grow up any place else because it taught me to be humble; it taught me to get out of tough situations; it taught me to help others to get out of these situations,” she said. “That’s why I want to be a teacher.”

TAMPA BAY	PARENT	CONTACT	QUOTE
HILLSBOROUGH	Nina and Demetrius Cherry	813-919-6118 nina.cherry@gmail.com	<p>Students like Jaedin Henry are among the beneficiaries of the scholarship program.</p> <p>His parents, Nina and Demetrius Cherry, qualified for the scholarship program two years ago, after they struggled financially and lost their house. They fell in love with Tampa Bay Christian Academy, a small preK-12 private school in Tampa where their four children, ages 6 to 15, could stay together.</p> <p>At first, Jaedin didn't like it as much as his former neighborhood school. But he joined the basketball team, made new friends and focused on his studies. Today, he's a sophomore routinely landing on the honor roll and his goals are set: college, then law school or the military.</p> <p>"Everyone who needs a scholarship should get one," Jaedin said. "It actually boosts the economy when you invest in education and the future. You never know, one of these kids could be the next Bill Gates." Added his mom: "Please don't take away this scholarship program. It was a life-saver for us."</p>
PINELLAS	Denese Flowers	727-565-5193	<p>Ten-year-old twins Chazlyn and Jerius Flowers of St. Petersburg are among the beneficiaries of the scholarship program.</p> <p>Their mother, Denese Flowers, has always been a proponent of school choice, using the Pinellas County choice options for both her older daughter and her twins.</p> <p>The twins started out at a public school Flowers was pleased with, but the school district suspended bus transportation for her children.</p>

Flowers found Mount Zion Christian Academy and learned about the tax credit scholarship, which allowed her twin son and daughter to start attending the school in third grade.

“I was like thank the Lord there is something out there,” she said, especially for her son Jerius, who has ADHD.

Smaller classrooms made all the difference, Flowers said. In public school he got mostly C’s and D’s. Now he’s getting A, B’s and an occasional C. His reading lagged, but now he’s doing great.

“We really struggled because of his ADHD,” said Flowers, who serves as PTA president. But now, “He’s loving his grades. He no longer says I’m not smart. He knows he can do it.”

SARASOTA

Rebekah Colvin 941-592-3828
rcolvin878@yahoo.com

Students like Benjamin Colvin are among the beneficiaries of the scholarship program.

After Benjamin was held back in kindergarten at his neighborhood school, his mom applied for a scholarship and enrolled him in Agape Christian School in Sarasota. Rebekah Colvin felt the school’s smaller environment and focus on individual student needs would benefit her son. Today, Benjamin is a junior earning mostly B’s while working as a dishwasher in the school cafeteria – part of Agape’s culinary program. He hopes to study engineering one day.

For his mom, it’s never been about private vs. public school. Her eldest son struggled with a speech delay and also used the scholarship to attend Agape. He graduated in 2014. Her middle son participates in the gifted program at a nearby traditional public school. And her youngest son,

		<p>diagnosed with a speech disorder and sensory deafness, goes to Agape on the McKay Scholarship, another state scholarship for children with special needs.</p> <p>“For me, it’s more important to find what’s best for the individual child,” said Colvin, who is attending the rally. “That’s what makes the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program and others like it so important. I can do what’s best and what works best for the kids.”</p>
<p>SARASOTA</p>	<p>Natalya and Vasily Bilik</p> <p>941-204-4588 vnbilik@yahoo.com</p>	<p>Students like Rianna Bilik are a beneficiary of the scholarship program.</p> <p>Her parents, Natalya and Vasily Bilik, got Rianna a scholarship four years ago after she was bullied at her neighborhood school and her grades fell. She tried homeschooling, but felt isolated. Now she attends Englewood Christian School, a small private school in Sarasota County with 50 students in kindergarten through 12th grade.</p> <p>A junior, Rianna likes the small classes, Christian environment and ample one-on-one time with teachers. She’s catching up academically, working at her own pace and earning mostly B’s while trying new things like shop class and theater.</p> <p>“The scholarship program has made me understand that I have choices when it comes to my education,” said Rianna, who’s attending the rally with her parents. “Please don’t take away this program. It’s always better to have options because there’s more than one way to learn.”</p>
<p>BRADENTON</p>	<p>Summer Mays</p> <p>941-448-5062 barbarak72@gmail.com</p>	<p>Students like Kyla Mays are among the beneficiaries of the scholarship program.</p> <p>Kyla uses the scholarship to attend</p>

her mother's alma mater, Bradenton Christian School, a small private school in Manatee County where Summer Mays felt her daughter wouldn't get lost in the crowd. It's a safe environment where everyone knows each other and the eighth-grader gets plenty of one-on-one attention. A budding violinist, Kyla earns mostly A's and participates in the National Junior Honor Society. Her favorite classes are English, choir and orchestra.

She can't imagine going to any other school or why anyone wouldn't support the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program.

"I think it would be sad not to be able to go to the school that I wanted because of money," said Kyla, who is riding a bus with her classmates to the rally. "I think students should have the chance to go where they want and to have the education they want. I don't really think it takes away from public education. Really, all these scholarships are doing is helping students go to school."

SOUTHWEST FLORIDA	PARENT	CONTACT	QUOTE
LEE	Syreeta Johnson	239-961-0586	<p>Students like Anthony and Brandon Benjamin are among the recipients of the scholarship program.</p> <p>Anthony is a fifth grader who loves to read, but that wasn't always the case. His mother, Syreeta Johnson, explained that from Kindergarten to third grade, Anthony was getting into frequent trouble at his neighborhood school and not making academic progress. One day, out of desperation, she went to New Life Academy, not knowing if she would be able to afford the school, and to her surprise, she was eligible for a tax credit scholarship. Her son's life changed dramatically. With more guidance and personal attention, Anthony now gets A's</p>

			<p>and B's and loves to read.</p> <p>Meanwhile, his brother Brandon, an eighth-grader at New Life, will be going back to public school after this school year. Syreeta said he has a strong foundation now and will do great in his neighborhood school.</p> <p>"Public schools don't work for everyone. I have three sons and one does wonderful in public school," said Syreeta, an employee at Lowe's home improvement store. "But my two youngest, they needed the personal attention they get at New Life. I am so grateful for the scholarships."</p>
COLLIER	Angelene Dorcelian	239-248-7954	<p>Students like Widney and Woodson Dorcelian are among the beneficiaries.</p> <p>Widney is in fifth grade at Naples Adventist Christian School. Woodson is in second grade. Their mother, Angelene Dorcelian, said she chose to put them there, with help from tax credit scholarships, because the school is smaller and more orderly, and her children get more individualized attention.</p> <p>"The scholarships allowed us to put our children in a school where they are excited about learning," said Mrs. Dorcelian, a nursing assistant who also has two children in public school. "Knowing that we could lose the scholarship because of the lawsuit, we knew we had to be a part of the rally. We want everyone to see that this is making our lives better."</p>

SOUTH FLORIDA	PARENT	CONTACT	QUOTE
MIAMI-DADE	Jeannette Ruiz	Melissa Rego, principal at La Progresiva Presbyterian, where Mrs. Ruiz's son, Valentin Mendez, is enrolled on scholarship. Phone: 305-323-4833. Email: mrego@mylps.net , MRego@laprogresivaschool.org	<p>Students like Valentin Mendez are among the beneficiaries of the scholarship program.</p> <p>Valentin's mother, Jeannette Ruiz, got a scholarship for him five years ago after he was bullied relentlessly in public school and began failing. The scholarship allowed him to enroll at La Progresiva Presbyterian</p>

		<p>School, which opened in Miami in 1971 after being shut down by Fidel Castro in Cuba. Now a junior at La Progresiva, Valentin is making straight A's, planning to go to a college, and setting his sights on becoming a doctor or businessman.</p> <p>"The scholarship changed Valentin's life and made his future bright," said Mrs. Ruiz, who will be speaking at the rally with Valentin. "We don't understand why the teachers union would want to take away something that helped our son live out his dreams. If Valentin loses his scholarship, it will be devastating to him and to our family."</p>
BROWARD	<p>Claudine Alcina 954-798-0517</p>	<p>Students like Dina, Deanna and Deandra Piquant are among the beneficiaries of the scholarships.</p> <p>Claudine Alcina, their mother, determined New Hope Learning Center in Fort Lauderdale was the perfect fit for her girls, who are in sixth and third grades and kindergarten, respectively. She said all three are thriving there in part because of the school's close-knit, family atmosphere and the one-on-one attention it focuses on her children. But it wouldn't have been financially possible, she said, without tax credit scholarships.</p> <p>"Everybody's trying to find the best school for their children, and the scholarships allowed us to enroll our children in the best school for them," said Mrs. Alcina, who works as an office manager. "That's why we wanted to be at the rally. We want people to know how important the scholarship is, and how much of a positive difference it has made in our lives."</p>
PALM BEACH	<p>Sharon Bartlett 561-584-3380</p>	<p>Students like Shane Evans and Gabrielle Bartlett are among the</p>

beneficiaries of the scholarship program.

Sharon Bartlett, Gabrielle's mother, found out about the tax credit scholarship eight years ago when her 8-year-old brother, Shane, was not learning to read in his neighborhood school. The scholarship allowed the family to enroll Shane at a small school in Boynton Beach, which gave him one-on-one attention and tutored him until he was reading at his grade level. After catching up, Shane, now 14 and in high school, went back to public school.

Seeing how much the private school helped her brother led Mrs. Bartlett to apply for a tax credit scholarship for her daughter, now a sixth-grader and honor roll recipient at West Palm Beach Jr. Academy. Like Shane, she said, Gabrielle benefits from a close-knit environment that is safe and secure.

"If the lawsuit is successful and they take my daughter's scholarship away, my family will be destroyed," said Mrs. Bartlett, who will attend the rally with her daughter. "I believe in this program and I hope those who can save this program will, too."

TREASURE COAST

Timothy and
Linda Gordon 772-940-1941
lindagordon14@gmail.com

Students like Harry Gordon are among the beneficiaries of the scholarship.

Harry's father, Timothy Gordon, says he used to receive a call everyday about problems within the district school his son was attending. Gordon worried that school fights and other distractions threatened his son's education. Gordon jumped at the chance for another opportunity after hearing about the tax credit scholarship. Now Harry's an 11th grader on the A/B honor roll at

Golden Rule Academy in Ft. Pierce.

“I wish every child had the same opportunity,” said Gordon about the scholarship program. “I’d be very hurt if we lose the scholarship.”