

Tax-Credit Scholarships for At-Risk Students Extend Civil Rights

Posted on February 16, 2010, 5:07 pm.

By the Rev. H.K. Matthews

Last fall, I shared a stage inside a crowded Fort Lauderdale chapel with a young man who at one point in his life seemed destined for failure but rose to become valedictorian of his eighth-grade class. His name is Antonio Trigo, a student now at Miami Union Academy. As a child, he fought so often with his classmates that the grandmother who raised him was desperate to find a school that could help turn around the wayward boy.

She found a scholarship that helped pay for tuition to a school she thought would work, tuition that otherwise would be out of reach. Soon, the Cs and Ds Antonio had brought home in the past turned into As and Bs. He learned to play the piano and, by the eighth-grade, was testing two levels above his grade.

Stories like his are the reason I dedicate my efforts to what I believe is a natural extension of the civil-rights movement: equal educational opportunities for all children, regardless of socioeconomic status. The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship that has blessed Antonio and his grandmother helps public education fulfill that mission, and we are fortunate that a legislative effort is underway to ease the financial burden on the poor families it serves.

The scholarship is a learning option for low-income students in grades K-12 that today benefits nearly 28,000 students in 1,020 private schools throughout Florida. It is available only to those whose household income qualifies them for a free or reduced-price lunch, but those guidelines barely begin to capture the poverty known by these families. Children in the program come from households where the average income is just 20 percent above the federal poverty level. Despite this disadvantage, these families contribute on average more than \$1,000 out of their pockets to pay the tuition the scholarship does not cover.

A bill filed last week in the Florida Legislature by Rep. Will Weatherford (HB1009) would reduce this disparity by setting the scholarship at four-fifths of the Legislature's basic formula for per-student spending, which equates to about half the total per-student spending in public schools. Such a measure would help reduce the increasing gap between the current \$3,950 scholarship and the average tuition at participating schools. But the bill also would open the scholarship program to greater academic and financial scrutiny, calling for public disclosure of test score gains and financial reports from individual schools.

Bipartisan Support Builds

The scholarship program has amassed bipartisan support in the past, with a bill last year winning the support of nearly half of the Democrats, a majority of the Legislative Black Caucus and the entire Hispanic Caucus. Rep. Weatherford's bill is certain to continue that trend, and he will receive support from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which sees it as a cause for social justice. As Rep. Darryl Rouson, the former president of the St. Petersburg NAACP chapter, said of the program recently: "We (Democrats) have seen value and we have seen successes."

Unfortunately, there are still a few holdouts in the Democratic Party who mistake this option as an attack on public education. Sen. Frederica Wilson of Miami went so far as to call the existence of the scholarship "not America" by taking children out of public schools and "making them weaker." I wonder what she might say to Antonio, whose academic rise is enriched by a private school in her own legislative district.

The Tax Credit Scholarship is not a solution for every child, but it is one tool to aid public educators in their efforts to reach at-risk children. Consider this: The high-school graduation rate for African-American males in Florida is 38 percent. More than half of black males in fourth grade can't read at grade level. Too many of our children are failing and dropping out, and I have no patience for those who would deny them educational opportunities. Through this program, Antonio and thousands of other students like him are achieving success.

I have devoted my life to the cause of social justice for all people in America, particularly black people. I walked with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. across the bridge in Selma, sat at segregated lunch counters in Pensacola, and was jailed 35 times during the process. I fought so that the generations that came after me would have an equal opportunity, and nowhere is that more important now than in public education.

Three years ago, I joined 4,000 marchers in Tallahassee to support this program. I'll be back this year with even more to show it again.

The Rev. H.K. Matthews is a long-time civil-rights leader in Florida. His autobiography, "Victory After the Fall," was published in 2007.



The Rev. H.K. Matthews