

On August 16th, The St. Pete Times published a column by Bill Maxwell concerning parental choice in education and the black community. We commend the Times for covering this vital topic, and for publishing letters to the editor on both sides of the issue. Here at the Black Alliance For Educational Options we felt that the readers of the Times should see two more important letters in this vital discussion.

Dear Editor,

Times columnist Bill Maxwell published a column on August 16 that stated black lawmakers face a dilemma: support public schools or support school choice programs. There is no dilemma: black leaders can support public education and parental choice. Black families need solutions. Choice programs empower these families to choose the best schools for their children, whether they be public or private.

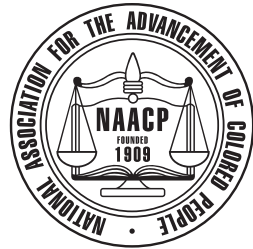
What Maxwell has right is that the education of black children in Florida is a crisis situation. According to a 2005 study by the Harvard Civil Rights Project, only 45% of black children will graduate Florida high schools—and only 38% of black males.

This state of educational emergency has led black leaders in Florida such as Carrie Meek, State Senator Al Lawson and others to rethink their initial objections to empowering black parents with choice. This crisis has spurred the creation of groups like The Black Alliance For Educational Options, founded by the former Superintendent of the Milwaukee Public Schools, which is dedicated to bringing parental choice to black families across the country. On the national stage, black leaders such as Newark Mayor Cory Booker, former Congressman Harold Ford, and Philadelphia Mayoral candidate Dwight Evans loudly and strongly demand choice for black parents.

Maxwell wants parents to be engaged. He says “the black community shares essential responsibility for a school’s poor performance.” But you cannot demand engagement and responsibility from parents without giving them power. What if they engage, are active, and their demands for improvement are ignored? What recourse do they have if they are assigned to a school based solely on their address? What if, despite the best efforts of his parents and teachers, a school is just not a good fit for a child?

Remember that these programs do not automatically transfer children from public schools to private schools. All they do is give low-income parents the power to make such a decision. If a school is working for their child, the child stays. I am in favor of giving black parents more power.

This education crisis for black children is so severe and so complex that we need to move beyond blame; we need to move beyond labels. Northwestern High School in Miami, which has 93% black students, is labeled a “F” by the state. Yet they have one of the best choir programs in the



country. Graduates of Northwestern go on to Howard University, University of Florida, and other colleges. But the school just doesn’t work for all the kids assigned to it. There are some assigned to the school who will drop out—and more than 50% do. They need a different environment, plain and simple.

Not far from Northwestern is Miami Union Academy, a private school that has been around for 70 years. It also is almost 100% black. It graduates 95% of its kids, and 90% go on to college. This doesn’t mean Miami Union is a better school than Northwestern. It means that it’s a better school for some students — students who would have otherwise dropped out.

The average tuition at Miami Union is \$4,400 per year. Even though that’s less than half the per pupil operating expenses of the Dade County public schools, it’s way too much for most parents in the neighborhood. That’s why 100 of their 300 kids attend on the Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship Program for low-income children, a program Maxwell presumably would object to.

Maxwell cites a concern for public school funds. However, the biggest drain of funds on the public schools is dropouts! The most optimistic sources say that only 70% of all kids graduate Florida public schools. Every year 200,000 kids enter 9th grade. If we assume they drop out after two years — perhaps optimistic — that means at any time there are 120,000 kids missing from our schools. The state funds our public schools based on how many kids show up—this year at \$7,300 per student. That means that dropouts are draining almost \$900 million a year from public schools.

We need to be more concerned about children, rather than a system. Maxwell is right when he describes the challenges facing black children in today’s society. The severity and complexity of those challenges is why we need a diversity of learning environments for black children. Expecting a “one size fits all” solution to work is unrealistic. I want to empower black parents to choose the best schools for their kids. I trust them to make the right decision, and Maxwell should too.

Sincerely,

Curtis Stokes
President of Hillsborough County Chapter
of the NAACP

To the Editor:

We recently read, “Vouchers Can’t Help If Black Parents Don’t.” As African-American students who were recipients of Step Up For Students Scholarships for five years, we strongly believe that school choice made it possible for us to graduate from high school. Prior to receiving the scholarships, we both struggled with math and reading in our public school and even failed fifth grade. The scholarship empowered our mother to choose a school that could help us overcome our difficulties.

Although it seemed impossible five years ago, this past June we both graduated from high school. We now have goals for ourselves and look forward to going to college. With school choice and our mother’s commitment to our education, we have been able to build a foundation for a brighter future.



Sincerely,

Arielle and Alliece Spencer
Step Up For Students recipients and
2007 graduates of PACE Private School



Black Alliance for Educational Options
www.baео.org

This advertisement paid for by the Black Alliance For Educational Options

The Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) is a national, nonprofit, nonpartisan membership organization whose mission is to actively support parental choice to empower families and increase quality educational options for Black children.