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CORPORATE TAX CREDIT SCHOLARSHIPS TURN A NEW PAGE
ON ACCOUNTABILITY

***The Florida Association of Scholarship Funding Organizations Celebrates
Passage of Comprehensive Fiscal and Educational Accountability Bill***

TAMPA, Fla., May 4, 2006 – Today, after three years of intense efforts to bring additional accountability oversight to the Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship Program and the John M. McKay Scholarship Program for Students with Disabilities, the House and Senate passed a measure that will greatly bolster accountability for the educational programs designed to provide school options for low-income and special needs students.

The Florida Association of Scholarship Funding Organizations (FLA-SFO) applauds House and Senate members for their wisdom in passing accountability measures that allow private schools to retain their identity, while granting the Florida Department of Education greater oversight of the programs that benefits more than 30,000 students each year.

"We have been fighting to pass this bill for three years," said FLA-SFO spokesperson Denise Lasher. "We strongly support its fiscal and academic accountability measures, including the requirement that our scholarship children take nationally recognized standardized tests," said Denise Lasher

spokeswomen for FLA-SFO, an organization comprised of scholarship funding entities that promote higher accountability standards.

Highlights of the bill's accountability measures include:

- Required standardized testing of students on Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship and longitudinal study of gains
- Federal and state criminal background checks of school employees
- Expanding eligibility of the CTC Program to current Opportunity Scholarship Students
 - Greater fiscal oversight of Scholarship Funding Organizations

“Since the program’s inception, FLA-SFO has fought to implement the highest ethical standards. Today we feel vindicated because it’s the standards FLA-SFO put in place three years ago that served as the basis for the final bill,” said Lasher. “FLA-SFO will continue to take an active role in advocating for school choice accountability to the benefit of Florida low-income students.”

FLA-SFO members include Florida PRIDE, and Children First Florida. FLA-SFO members are dedicated to helping schools and parents understand their rights and responsibilities under the CTC program. The association is committed to ensuring that its members adhere to the highest level of compliance with the law and follow stringent business and accounting standards and procedures.

Today LTE's in the Miami Herald

The Senate vote to deny us the chance to decide if we should protect scholarship programs such as the McKay Scholarships for Students with Disabilities was a travesty for parents like me.

I and 40 others from Miami-Dade traveled all night to make a last-minute appeal to Sens. Alex Villalobos and Larcenia Bullard to stand by their earlier commitment to support this bill. As a public-school teacher, I know that meeting students' needs is essential for good academic outcome. When my autistic son's needs were not being met, I opted for a McKay Scholarship; he is now flourishing at Atlantis Academy.

I met Villalobos two weeks ago in his Tallahassee office. He indicated that he would support this bill if the language requiring 65 percent of public-school expenditures be spent in the classroom was removed from the bill. It was removed later that day. I assumed Villalobos would stand by his commitment. But he didn't, failing to consider what was best for his constituents with special-needs children.

He was correct -- he serves at the pleasure of others. I hope that his constituents decide that it's time for someone else to serve their interests in Tallahassee.

LYNETTE ESTRADA, Homestead

Firsthand account of parent's visit to Villalobos' district office

In preparation for yesterday's meeting with Sen. Alex Villalobos's office regarding his going back on his word, Ms. Lynette Estrada called the media that she would be having a group of parents there to hold him accountable for his promises. Ms. Estrada is very committed to her family and protecting her son's scholarship. She is very busy as an Exceptional Ed teacher, in the public school, and a parent of two, including one son who is autistic, and she and others stepped up for their students. She called and faxed written information to Matther Pinzur at the Miami Herald and Ketty Rodriguez of El Nuevo Herald, both of whom have written on our issue before. The Sun-Sentinel, Diario las Americas, Telemuno, Univision, the ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox affiliates, plus the public TV station were all contacted. No press covered the event, but a letter to the editor sent by Ms. Estrada was published in the Herald this morning.

At about 4:00, about 20 parents and children walked into Sen. Villalobos's tiny Miami office. First to greet us was his aide, Vicki, who immediately yelled at Ms. Estrada, saying "I don't know why you don't understand and why we have to fight about this on the phone, this has nothing to do with McKay."

The aide calmed down a bit, but continued to tell our parents that SJR2170 had nothing to do with McKay, that it was for Opportunity Scholarships and that our parents clearly didn't understand or hadn't read the bill. Much to their credit, our visibly uncomfortable parents stood their ground even as they were told they didn't understand and were uneducated. I pointed out to the aide that our parents did know exactly what they were talking about and that SJR2170 was written for the sole purpose of protecting the *remaining* scholarship programs so they didn't meet the same fate as OSP.

Our parents asked over and over again why Mr. Villalobos had said he would support the bill and then didn't.

The aide took the position du jour: McKay is worth saving, but it shouldn't be in the same sentence with any other voucher program. The second aide we met with was less defensive. Her grandson is a special needs student on a McKay scholarship. She works for the sole purpose of making up the difference between his McKay scholarship and what the school costs. She told us she never sees a penny of her paycheck, it goes directly to his education. She said Mr. Villalobos is very concerned about McKay, but failed to answer why he won't protect it. They said McKay is not broken, so why allow it to go to the voters and possibly lose if it's been working fine for six years? I explained that the OSP program worked fine for five years, too, until it was struck down.

She then said, "Mr. Myer said if he was going to challenge McKay he would've done it years ago," at which point Jenny told her that she was mistaken. Mr. Myer had, in fact, said that if he had known how slow the process of winding through the courts with OSP was going to be, he would've sued on McKay to begin with.

All the parents and children retired to the landing outside the office because it was getting too warm and crowded inside. When they stepped out, about 15 more parents and children had arrived and were listening from outside. They put their thoughts and names and phone numbers down on a piece of paper, which the aides said they would fax to the Senator and ask him to respond to at least Ms. Estrada to account for his change of position.

As the participants were outside doing that, Jenny stayed inside with the two aides. She figured the first one would be much less defensive without so many people around, so she chatted with her casually and then brought up that it seemed like the disconnect between their position and the parents' position was a disagreement as to whether or not McKay is in danger. Jenny reiterated what Mr. Myer had said and that the ALCU had also threatened the legislature on Pre-K. She further explained to them that because the Supreme Court was silent on Blaine, current law of the land is that programs that allow public money to go to faith-based institutions are still illegal. Based on that fact, it would be easy for anyone to sue and win against McKay because it does just that. All this information seemed to be new to her. After that, she was friendly to Ms. Estrada, faxed the list of names in front of her and gave her a copy of the list and the fax confirmation to take home.

Some of the best stuff happened after the meeting: several McKay schools we haven't been in touch with were present and all indicated they would like to engage. They invited me to come down during the summer to address their parents and were encouraged to sign up for the FACE newsletter in the meantime. Every single parent we spoke to said, "whatever you need me for, even if it's just a face, to help these programs, I will be there."

Please view the picture so you can see what a great crowd we had in that tiny space.