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Influential Groups Block Doors Of Opportunity To Poor Students

By LINCOLN J. TAMAYO

Special to the Tribune

An education disaster looms on the horizon for some of the most marginalized students in our state, and a few powerful groups are aligned to ensure it happens.

This fall the Florida Supreme Court, in the case of Bush vs. Holmes, will rule on the constitutionality of the Opportunity Scholarship Program, which, at an average of \$3,800 per child, provides a lifeline of hope for hundreds of underprivileged children mired in chronically failing public K-12 schools throughout the state. Parents in these schools may use the taxpayer-funded scholarships to send their children to private secular or sectarian schools.

The spirit behind such an opportunity is that parents - regardless of skin color, financial hardship or ZIP code - have the right to choose to shield their children from the educational depravity infecting so many of our public inner-city schools. The scuttlebutt from Tallahassee is not hopeful; it is likely that a majority of the high court will rule against this program.

Why would anyone fight real education opportunity for poor minority children? The answer lies in the Florida Constitution, where Article I, Section 3 states that no state

funds can be used ``directly or indirectly in aid of any church, sect, or religious denomination or in aid of any sectarian institution."

Let's get something straight here. The Opportunity Scholarship Program has nothing to do with benefiting - directly or indirectly - any sectarian school. If its intent were to do so, then it would require that all children taking advantage of the scholarships enroll in these schools. It doesn't.

What it does is benefit loving parents who have had enough of public inner-city schools that abide sheer incompetence and the silent bigotry of low expectations for the poor and disenfranchised. That the benefit may lead to a religious school is purely ancillary to the issue of educational accountability.

One should hope that groups like the American Civil Liberties Union and the Florida Education Association - those self-professed defenders of the downtrodden - would be first in line to defend poor families demanding better education for their children, and that these groups would see to it that every available door was opened for them.

Think again. The ACLU and the teachers unions are leading the charge in the Florida Supreme Court to defeat the Opportunity Scholarship Program.

The ACLU, which is supposedly in the business of defending civil liberties, apparently believes that one of our most basic civil liberties - the right to equal educational opportunity for all Americans - is trumped by the necessity to shield poor children - and with them our tax dollars - from possibly rubbing elbows with God. In effect, the ACLU is standing at the schoolhouse steps, blocking the doors of opportunity to children who yearn to be educated anywhere - religious or not - that will hold them to the standards they deserve. The ghosts of George Wallace and Orval Faubus must be smiling.

And then there's the Florida Education Association. It doesn't give a damn about the mix of religion, schools and tax dollars, for if it did, it would also be going after Bright Futures and universal prekindergarten, the very popular programs providing millions of tax dollars to tens of thousands of college and preschool students to attend public and private institutions, including multitudes of the religious persuasion.

Opportunity Scholarships, on the other hand, directly threaten the very base of power and wealth for the teachers unions - K-12 schools. These people will shamelessly come up with anything, including using God as a red herring, to protect that base.

And the real scary thing is that when the unions and the ACLU get their way with the Supreme Court on Opportunity Scholarships, others will certainly attack Bright Futures and universal pre-K. Intellectual consistency dictates that if tax dollars cannot mix with religious K-12 schools, then they can't possibly mix with religious Pre-K schools and colleges.

Perhaps when the more popular oxen get gored, we'll begin to take serious note. But until then, we'll have to deal with the tragedy of crushing the education hopes of the children who need our help the most but are being forsaken by those who profess to protect their interests. Why, in God's name, do we allow this to happen?

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