

The Miami Times

February 14, 2007

White House Fellows Visit Miami to Learn About Scholarship Program

The White House Fellows (WHF), is one of the Nation's most prestigious programs for leadership and public service, traveled to Miami to visit New Jerusalem Christian Academy. Founded by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964, WHF offers young men and women first-hand experience working at the highest levels of the federal government.

The visit was in effort to learn about the national School Choice movement and the Florida scholarship program, Step Up For Students; a scholarship which enables low-income families to choose the public or private school that best meets their children's needs.

New Jerusalem Christian Academy opened in 2003 and serves 160 children, of which 99 percent are Black, from pre-kindergarten through sixth grade. Just under half of its students are recipients of the Step Up For Students scholarships.

The Fellows heard directly from 10 parents of children who attend the school. The scholarship program was started in 2002; the average household income of recipient families is \$22,000. Currently, 40 percent of the 17,000 students enrolled in the statewide program are Black. Over 4,000 children in Dade County use the scholarships.

"This program has been a total blessing", said Marquita Forsett, parent of a scholarship student. "For the first time, I am empowered to find the best environment for my child that provides the most suitable education possible. I am so grateful."

White House Fellow, Westley Moore, was among the Fellows to visit New Jerusalem Christian Academy. Moore grew up in the Bronx and Baltimore and was a scholarship recipient as a child. "New Jerusalem Christian Academy offered us a chance to see parental choice in action," Moore, 28, said. "I was so glad to see so many parents experiencing the same choice my mother had. It's programs like these that are bold and innovative and provide opportunities for low-income children."

With graduation rates among African Americans below 50 percent, school choice will turn lives around and provide all low-income children with the tools necessary for a successful life, Moore said. "Opportunities and chances for success should not be defined by parental income levels."

Pauline Benton-Darling, administrator at New Jerusalem Christian Academy, is a veteran of the Dade County Public Schools with over 20 years of experience. Darling told the Fellows about the successes the school has had with their students. "I am extremely proud of our students ability to excel using the ABEKA curriculum," Benton-Darling said. "We begin working with students at age 2 in our daycare program and the children are

learning cursive writing at a Pre-K level."

Benton-Darling said that when she graduates her students, they continue to achieve great success in the public middle and high schools. "One of our first grade students recently left to attend a public school that wanted her to enter Kindergarten due to her age," Benton-

Darling said. "After her parents were adamant that her knowledge far exceeded that of a Kindergartener, they had her tested and discovered that she performed at the second grade gifted level."

"It was a great honor to host the White House Fellows at our school," said Benton-Darling. "They are such wonderful role models for my students, and I hope we were able to provide them with a lasting impression of the positive effect of this program."

Fellows participate in an education program consisting of roundtable discussions with leaders from the private and public sectors, and study trips to examine U.S. policy in action. Following the Fellowship year, many Fellows repay the privilege by contributing to the Nation as better leaders and public servants. Parents interested in the scholarship program can call 1-800-782-9140 or go to www.stepupforstudents.com.



