

4,000 Attend Voucher Rally at Capitol

by Bill Cotterell

TALLAHASSEE -- An icon of the civil rights movement in Florida told cheering students, parents and school administrators today that giving poor families the same kind of school choice rich kids enjoy is "a continuation of the dream" that he fought for 40 years ago.

"This is a flashback of the old movement," the Rev. H.K. Matthews said as he surveyed the placard-waving crowd of more than 4,000 in the plaza between Florida's old and modern Capitols.

"All of us who are here want what's best for our children, our parents and our state," said Matthews, who counts nearly three-dozen arrests in a civil-rights career extending back to his presidency of the Pensacola Council of Ministers in the 1960s.

Gov. Charlie Crist, House Speaker pro tempore Dennis Baxley, R-Ocala, and state Sen. Al Lawson, D-Tallahassee, promised to work for passage of bills expanding and protecting the corporate tax-credit system that permits companies to donate part of their business taxes to scholarship-funding organizations. One of the pending bills would increase the \$4,000 cap on corporate-funded scholarships to \$4,250 for students in middle and high schools.

But because the Florida Supreme Court threw out ex-Gov. Jeb Bush's system for using state tax dollars directly for "opportunity scholarships," supporters of the corporate program fear that another court suit will end those scholarships, too.

"From the Florida House, help is on the way," said Baxley, who was filling in for Speaker Marco Rubio, R-West Miami.

Organizers of the mass rally counted 4,170 passengers aboard buses from as far away as Miami. The crowd included hundreds of students, parents, and administrators from academies -- most of them wearing t-shirts inscribed "Many Faces, One Dream."

"It's imperative for the Legislature to continue scholarship funding," said Gary Montgomery, chairman of the S.L. Jones Christian Academy in Pensacola. He said his school has 150 students, from kindergarten through high school, and about half of them receive some scholarship aid.