

Black Leaders Rethink Vouchers

A longtime politician has broken ranks, and others may follow.

By Ron Matus



Former U.S. Rep. Carrie Meek

AUGUST 12--For years, teachers and others who opposed private school vouchers in Florida could count on black lawmakers to stand with them. But there are signs that support may be

cracking.

The most recent example came last week. The foundation named for former U.S. Rep. Carrie Meek, an icon in the black community and a longtime voucher opponent, announced it would be awarding hundreds of vouchers to low-income kids in Miami.

"I spent a great part of my life trying to strengthen minority children and minority families," Meek, 81, said in a phone interview from her Miami home. "To get a scholarship like this would be very helpful to some of these children."

Some legislative observers say Meek's shift could give black lawmakers more political cover to support vouchers, which allow students to attend private school at public expense. In Florida, minority students make up a huge share of voucher recipients, yet black lawmakers have been among the most vocal critics.

Meek's support may be "the catalyst ... to start a dialogue," said state Rep. Terry Fields, a black Democrat from Jacksonville who consistently opposed vouchers until a few years ago.

"In Duval County there are 11 "F" schools, and all 11 of those "F" schools are in the African-

American community," Fields continued. "We're at a place in time where we have to be creative and get out of our comfortable boxes and do what's best for our kids."

The response from critics: Vouchers are "always a bad idea," no matter who supports them, said Mark Pudlow, a spokesman for the Florida Education Association, the state teachers union. "I understand where their frustration is coming from. I understand folks are looking for a solution." But vouchers are "setting up false hopes."

United front weakens

Then-Gov. Jeb Bush and his Republican allies initiated vouchers in 1999, saying they would offer lifelines to students "trapped" in failing public schools and, by injecting market-style competition into the system, drive improvement throughout.

But critics countered that vouchers were a distraction, a financial drain and a right-wing plot to undermine public schools. Some opponents also argue that voucher proponents are using minorities as a Trojan horse to sneak in the idea of universal vouchers for all students, not just those who are poor, minority or disabled.

"I don't see how any African-American can support vouchers," state Sen. Frederica Wilson, D-Miami, once said. "Those who do are very misled and they are moving along a path that they don't understand."

Whether black lawmakers are warming up to vouchers is not an idle debate.

In 2006, the state Senate failed by a single vote to put a constitutional amendment on the ballot aimed at protecting vouchers from future legal challenges. Six of seven black senators voted no.

For now, most black lawmakers - all Democrats - continue to side with voucher opponents. "I don't think you're going to see a groundswell of support from African-American lawmakers," said state Rep. Curtis Richardson, D-Tallahassee, who is black and a member of the House Education Council. Vouchers "hurt the schools we represent more so than the others."

But opposition is no longer universal. In the spring, several black lawmakers, including state Rep. Betty Reed of Tampa, voted in favor of a bill that proposed tweaks to existing voucher programs. The changes were backed by a wide array of pro-voucher groups.

Reed could not be reached for comment last week.

But state Sen. Al Lawson, D-Tallahassee, said he expects more black lawmakers to cross over, especially newer members who don't have strong ties to old alliances and are "open to different ideas." He said they're frustrated by pathetic graduation rates among black students and feeling pressure from black ministers with ties to private schools.

"When you have a lot of poor kids in your area that need help, and you have people saying, 'We're willing to work with these kids,' ... it's hard to say no," he said.

Lawson himself voted against establishment of the tax-credit voucher in 2001. But in 2006 he was the lone black senator to vote for the voucher amendment and in the spring, he spoke in front of thousands of minority kids and parents at a pro-voucher rally in Tallahassee.

Source of money is factor

In some states, black politicians and vouchers haven't been consistently at odds. In Wisconsin, a black lawmaker sponsored the bill that created Milwaukee's voucher program. In New Jersey,

Newark Mayor Cory Booker is a leading voucher supporter.

In Florida, the teachers union successfully challenged the state's first voucher program, Opportunity Scholarships, which the Florida Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional last year. But two other programs have gone unchallenged, including the tax-credit voucher now embraced by Meek.

Under that program, which included nearly 17,000 students this year, corporations can direct a portion of their state taxes to private tuition for low-income children. Both Meek and the executive director of her foundation, Anthony Williams, said that made the program fundamentally different and more acceptable than Opportunity Scholarships, which took money directly out of state coffers.

"Vouchers are state funded," Williams said. "These are privately funded."

Voucher critics scoff at that distinction.

But Meek did not deny that her take on vouchers has changed in recent years. "I was an opponent because I thought vouchers were taking away from public schools," she said. But "the way I see it now, they are not taking away."

Public schools and vouchers, she said, are "not mutually exclusive."