

# TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

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## Civil-rights leader: Give parents choice in school

By Bill Cotterell

An icon of Florida's civil-rights movement told students, parents and education administrators Thursday that giving poor families school choice is "a continuation of the dream" that black leaders envisioned 40 years ago.

"All of us who are here want what's best for our children, our parents and our state," the Rev. H.K. Matthews said as he surveyed the placard-waving crowd in the plaza between Florida's old and modern Capitols.

"This is a flashback of the old movement," said Matthews, whose civil-rights activism extends back to his presidency of the Pensacola Council of Ministers in the early 1960s. "It's a continuation of the dream."

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 lets companies give part of their business taxes to scholarship-funding organizations.

The Florida Supreme Court last year 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 lawsuit might scuttle those scholarships, too.

Angela Keys said her daughter Arie, 12, and son Jeremiah, 10, "are on the A-B honor roll" at S.L. Jones Christian Academy but never did as well in Pensacola's public schools. She said proponents of the corporate tax-credit program don't want to take money away from public education "but one size does not fit all with every child in every school."

Sharonda Perkins of Tallahassee said less than 40 percent of black boys graduate in public schools.

She said her son, a fifth-grader at North Florida Christian, has benefited from the tax-credit scholarship program.

"I am an unwavering supporter of school choice," she said. "School choice is not a political issue, it's a civil-rights issue."

Crist, a former education commissioner and attorney general, told the crowd his administration is "committed to you and committed to your children's future."

"Education is the equal opportunity provider in this country," he said. "That is what America is all about."

State Rep. Curtis Richardson, D-Tallahassee, did not attend the rally. A former Leon County School Board member, Richardson said allowing companies to divert some taxes to scholarship-funding organizations hurts kids in public schools.

"Our efforts ought to be put into improving our public education programs, which are woefully under-funded," said Richardson. "We have no guarantees that these children are getting a better education, or even as good an education, in these private academies."

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."

Lawson, who broke ranks with other Democrats to support Bush's unsuccessful attempt at restoring tuition vouchers last year, said the rally will make an impression on the House and Senate in the final three weeks of their 2007 session.

"I can assure you that 4,000 faces will not be ignored," he said. "I am the strongest possible supporter of public education. But I know that not every school works for every child."



Phil Sears  
Gov. Crist and civil rights leader HK Matthews unite for school choice at the 2007 Rally in Tallahassee