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TWO THOUSAND EXPECTED TO GATHER IN TALLAHASSEE TO WITNESS STATE SUPREME COURT'S HEARING ON OPPORTUNITY SCHOLARSHIPS

Parents, Educators and Community Leaders Say School Choice is Constitutional; Warn of "Domino Effect" on Other Scholarship Programs If Opportunity Scholarships Are Eliminated

Tallahassee, FL – (June 7, 2005) – Leaving their summer vacations behind, thousands of students – representing some 200,000 scholarship recipients – gathered in Tallahassee today to support the state's **Opportunity Scholarship Program** and warn parents about the future of educational choice in Florida. To make their point, March participants wore t-shirts with the international sign of "warning."

Oral arguments, which began at 9 a.m. today, were made before the Florida Supreme Court in the *Bush v. Holmes* case, which will determine whether parents and students can choose to use taxpayer funded scholarships at private and faith-based educational institutions.

March organizers, including the **Black Alliance for Educational Options, Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options, Florida State Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, McKay Coalition, Florida African American Education Alliance and the Florida Black Chamber of Commerce**, say the event will enlighten parents and students about the potential ramifications of this court decision. At stake is the ability of families and students to decide which schools best fit their needs, regardless of religious or non-religious affiliations.

The court's decision could immediately impact school options for more than 700 Opportunity Scholarship recipients. In addition to Opportunity Scholarships, approximately 200,000 students in 11 Florida school choice programs, including Bright Futures Scholarships for college students and McKay Scholarship for Students with Disabilities, could lose educational options if the court rules Opportunity Scholarships unconstitutional. This number does not include the estimated 90,000 to 150,000 students planning to use the Voluntary Pre-K (VPK) choice program this fall. The majority of VPK providers are expected to be faith-based.

"Because scholarships aid parents, not schools or religious institutions, we believe the court will rule in support of Opportunity Scholarships, just as courts did in other states with similar constitutions," said event emcee and founder of BAEO, Dr. Howard Fuller. Fuller was superintendent of public schools in Milwaukee when widespread educational choice was implemented. "These programs are legal according to Florida's Constitution, which guarantees a 'high quality education' for each student. These programs work. I saw first hand how choice spurred improvement in Milwaukee's public schools – it's accomplishing the same goals in Florida!"

(more)

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An ACLU letter written March 4 to Senate President Tom Lee and House Speaker Allan Bense, cited the lower court decisions in the Opportunity Scholarships case to warn that implementation of a program like Voluntary Pre-K, which includes religious options, "will inevitably be more litigation."

The march has drawn the attention of educational leaders who are fighting for school choice on a national scale including former Florida Senator John McKay, founder of McKay Scholarships; Julio Fuentes, President of the Florida State Hispanic Chamber of Commerce; and Virginia Walden Ford. Walden Ford, Executive Director of DC Parents for School Choice and Chair of DC BAEO, will talk about being one of the first black children to integrate into public schools following the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling and why equal educational opportunity remains a civil rights struggle today.

More than 20 state and national organizations have filed briefs urging the Florida Supreme Court to uphold Opportunity Scholarships including: The Salvation Army, Friends of Lubavich of Florida, Inc., The Florida Catholic Conference, The Child Developmental Education Alliance, The Florida Association of Academic Non-Public Schools and the Coalition of McKay Scholarship Schools.

"McKay Scholarships allows students with disabilities to learn and thrive in school settings that fit their unique challenges. It works because it puts families, mothers and fathers and caregivers, in the position to find the school that will allow their children to reach their full potential," said John McKay, founder of the program. "This essential program must be preserved."

Just as with Opportunity Scholarship recipients, McKay scholarship winners can currently choose among religious, non-religious, public or private institutions to fulfill their education.

For details about *Bush v. Holmes*, visit www.ij.org/schoolchoice/florida/index.html.

More information about our sponsors can be found at the following websites:

Black Alliance for Educational Options – www.baeo.org

Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options– www.hcreo.org

Florida State Hispanic Chamber of Commerce - www.fshcc.com

Florida African American Education Alliance - www.aaedalliance.com

Florida Black Chamber of Commerce - www.floridabcc.com

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