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## FLORIDA HOSTS THE LARGEST SCHOOL CHOICE RALLY IN US HISTORY, AS 4,000 GATHER TO PROTECT STATE-FUNDED SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMS

*Following the Supreme Court's Ruling on Opportunity Scholarships, Parents, Educators and Community Leaders in Tallahassee Say Legislators Must Act to Protect All Programs*

**Tallahassee, FL – (Feb. 15, 2006)** – Traveling overnight from as far as Miami and Ft. Myers, over 4,000 students – representing more than 200,000 scholarship recipients statewide – gathered in Tallahassee today in what is being hailed the largest school choice rally in US history. Participants asked the Legislature to protect Florida's state-funded scholarship programs in the wake of the Supreme Court's ruling that Opportunity Scholarships violate the state constitution. Parents, educators and community leaders warned the ruling, although limited to Opportunity Scholarships, could endanger a number of essential education programs. To make their point, participants wore T-shirts with life preservers and the message "S.O.S. Save Our Students."

The Florida Supreme Court's ruling in the *Bush v. Holmes* case, released in January, declares Opportunity Scholarships unconstitutional because, according to the court, the program violates the "Uniformity Clause" in the Florida Constitution. Approved by voters in 1998, the Article IX, section 1 clause says, "Adequate provision shall be made by law for a uniform, efficient, safe, secure, and high quality system of free public schools." Rally participants believe the clause was not intended to preclude alternative education programs such as Opportunity Scholarships. The ruling puts at immediate risk the McKay Scholarship Program for children with disabilities, as these scholarships are funded identically to Opportunity Scholarships.

"This school year, more than 700 students have taken advantage of the Opportunity Scholarship Program. Florida's school choice programs giving every student a chance to succeed, providing real choice to families while driving greater student achievement in low performing public schools," said Governor Jeb Bush. "Following a disappointing ruling by the Florida Supreme Court, we are exploring all legal options and will ask the Florida Legislature to seek a legislative remedy. All parents should have the opportunity to send their child to the school they believe holds the best chance for future success."

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The other key issue at stake is how the ruling addresses scholarships used at faith-based institutions. The Florida Supreme Court left unaddressed the legality of families using taxpayer funded scholarships at such schools or for programs such as the new Voluntary Pre-K program, Bright Futures college scholarships, and Florida Resident Access Grants remain at risk of being declared unconstitutional. All of these taxpayer-funded programs are used by students at faith-based schools. Last year the ACLU sent a letter to House Speaker Allan Bense and Senate President Tom Lee threatening litigation if faith based providers were allowed to serve pre-k children.

The rally attendees urged the legislature to place on the ballot in November an amendment to the Florida constitution that would remove the threat to all scholarship programs, from pre-k to college.

March organizers, including the **Coalition of McKay Scholarship Schools, Black Alliance for Educational Options, Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options and Florida Alliance For Choices in Education**, say the event will demonstrate to the Legislature the support for the scholarship programs and the urgent need to protect them from being declared unconstitutional and being shut down.

"There are thousands of parents here today because they know, first hand, that these scholarship programs have been a catalyst for change over the past six years and truly work." said McKay. "It would be disastrous for these children and our state to take away their right to an education that meets their unique needs."

The rally has drawn the attention of educational leaders who are fighting for school choice on a national scale including former Florida Senator John McKay, creator of McKay Scholarships and Julio Fuentes, President of the Florida State Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, both of whom spoke today, as well as, Ed Rodriguez of the Florida Black Chamber of Commerce; and the leadership of the Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options and the Black Alliance for Educational Options.

Brian Stephens, whose son, Joshua, attends the Dyslexia Institute of America in Tampa on a McKay Scholarship said he knows first hand the benefits of the program, "McKay Scholarships have given our family back the life we should have," he said. "I've taken this issue seriously. Not just depending on sound bytes for information, but delving deep into the issue and coming to the conclusion that an atmosphere where school options are available does work, not just my son, but all students."

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

The Coalition of McKay Scholarship Schools – [www.mckaycoalition.com](http://www.mckaycoalition.com)

Black Alliance for Educational Options – [www.baeo.org](http://www.baeo.org)

Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options– [www.hcreo.org](http://www.hcreo.org)

Florida Alliance for Choices in Education – [www.flace.org](http://www.flace.org)

Florida State Hispanic Chamber of Commerce - [www.fshcc.com](http://www.fshcc.com)

Florida Black Chamber of Commerce – [www.floridabcc.com](http://www.floridabcc.com)

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Editor's Note: Photos and b-roll of the march and rally are available. Please contact Kim Collins, 904-280-2773 or Nikisha Williams, 305-573-9955.