

Tampa Bay Times

‘School choice’ is dividing Florida Democrats along racial lines. Could it help Donald Trump?

Steve Contorno and Emily L. Mahoney

February 13, 2020

As he seeks reelection, President Donald Trump is making a direct appeal to black voters like Chikara Parks.

After her four kids experienced bullying and other problems at their south St. Petersburg school, Parks moved each one into private Christian academies.

She travels the state, and sometimes the country, telling reporters and other parents how public support of students attending private schools made it possible.

Trump made a similar pitch during his State of the Union earlier this month, singling out an attendee, a black fourth-grader from Philadelphia who had been awarded a private school voucher paid personally by his Education Secretary Betsy DeVos.

“No parent should be forced to send their child to a failing government school,” Trump said. (It was later revealed the fourth-grader actually attends a prestigious charter school).

Trump’s overtures aren’t going to erase the deep distrust for the president in black communities. And it’s unlikely that black voters will leave the Democratic Party in large numbers over an issue that’s commonly called “school choice.” That’s the blanket term for the support of policies like charter schools, which are public schools that are managed by private entities, and vouchers, which use tax dollars for private school tuition.

Not even Parks, a poster child for the school-choice movement, is buying what Trump is selling. She expects to vote for a Democrat in November.

“I don’t listen to what’s going on with Trump because of the lack of seriousness,” Parks said. “It’s just a lot.”

But Parks, 34, lives in the country’s largest battleground state, where Trump’s appeal to black voters coincides with a fight over vouchers in Tallahassee that is tearing Democratic leaders apart, often along racial lines.

In Florida, where elections are won and lost on razor-thin margins, seemingly minuscule shifts in enthusiasm and turnout with demographics can be decisive.

While a strong majority of black voters will support whoever the Democrats nominate, Trump’s stance on vouchers and charter schools “does put some minority votes at risk (for Democrats),” said Neal McCluskey, director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

At the very least, McCluskey said, Trump's State of the Union indicates that the president "thinks there's reality behind the perception that supporting school choice is something minority voters will tend to like."

Even Democratic leaders like Rep. Wengay "Newt" Newton, who hails from a poor and largely black area of St. Petersburg, said Democratic candidates have his support, but he'd like to grill them on their opposition to vouchers and charter schools.

"Somebody better give them a stink," he said.

•••

In Florida's Capitol, school vouchers have long split black Democratic lawmakers. That fissure was laid bare in recent weeks when Florida's tax credit scholarship program came under fire. An Orlando Sentinel investigation found that more than 80 private, religious schools accepting money from the program have policies that explicitly bar gay or transgender students. The program is funded by donations from companies that in turn get a deduction in state taxes. About \$645 million in scholarships was handed out last year, according to Florida's Department of Education.

Newton, along with other black Democrats and the Florida African-American Ministers Alliance, held a rally to defend the program as a handful of major corporations announced they would withdraw future contributions. U.S. Rep. Al Lawson, a black Democrat representing Tallahassee, sent a letter of support.

To qualify for Florida's tax credit scholarship, a student must be low income. About 104,000 students received that scholarship in the last school year, and 67% were either black or Hispanic, according to the Department of Education.

Newton said he wants to disrupt the flow of Florida's school-to-prison pipeline, where thousands of black juveniles are arrested each year. The scholarships are one of the few tools he he can put in place as a member of the minority party in Tallahassee.

"But I can make sure I provide every opportunity to make sure those kids have a way to succeed," he said. "The problem is when you ... try to free them from that life then you're a bad guy, you're a bad Democrat."

Not all black Democratic lawmakers feel the same. Many Democrats and public education advocates fiercely oppose vouchers and charter schools, viewing them as a veiled effort to undermine public education.

Sen. Oscar Braynon, D-Miami Gardens, said the state should focus its energy and resources on fixing traditional public schools, since that's where roughly 90% of Florida's students attend. He is opposed to vouchers.

"Most African-Americans are still in public schools and so problems ... like the school-to-prison pipeline, graduation rates, it's still disproportionately public schools that have to deal with it," Braynon said.

These complexities are why experts question whether micro-targeting messages on charter schools or vouchers will help Trump do better than the 6 percent of support he received from

black voters in 2016. As it stands, eight in 10 African Americans think Trump is a racist, according to a *Washington Post-Ipsos* poll.

“There’s not a lot of evidence that African-American parents are single-issue voters on education reform and are willing to really jettison some deep and long-lasting ties to the Democratic Party,” said Jeffrey Henig, director of the politics and education program at Columbia University’s teachers college.

But there is anecdotal evidence that some black voters have supported Republicans in Florida because of these issues.

In his race for governor in 1994, Jeb Bush was asked in a debate what he would do for black Floridians if elected. “Probably nothing,” Bush replied. He lost to Gov. Lawton Chiles in what was, at the time, the closest election in state history and earned just 6 percent of the black vote, according to exit polls.

Bush spent the following years softening his image and rebranding himself as an education reformist. He lobbied to pass Florida’s first charter school law and opened up Liberty City Charter School in Miami, serving one of the country’s poorest communities.

When he ran again in 1998, Bush won. His support from black voters jumped to 14 percent.

Looking back, Bush told the *Times/Herald* that school choice likely played a role in his improved standing in communities of color. He’s less certain if it will have the same effect for Trump, noting that most education policy is set at the state level.

Bush added that the recent fight over vouchers in Tallahassee shows there is backlash waiting if a Democratic presidential nominee vows to eliminate these programs.

“If people believe they’re going to lose something they have that they like, if you get to scale with parents having an abundance of choice, to take it away from them becomes really hard,” Bush said.

More recently, Gov. Ron DeSantis’ win has been credited to “school choice moms” in some education circles.

That’s based on a CNN exit poll of the 2018 election, which found that the Republican had unusually high support from black women. William Mattox, the director of the Marshall Center for Educational Options at the Tallahassee-based James Madison Institute, a libertarian group, declared in the *Wall Street Journal* that DeSantis’ victory showed his support of vouchers and charter schools had made the difference.

DeSantis barely squeaked out a win over Democrat Andrew Gillum, who would have been Florida’s first black governor.

•••

The 2020 crop of Democratic front-runners for president have taken notably rigid stances when it comes to charter schools and vouchers, siding with teachers’ unions and traditional public schools. That’s a departure from past Democrats, including former President Barack Obama, who championed an increase in federal support of charter schools.

Former South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg and former Vice President Joe Biden have both said for-profit charter schools should be banned. Sen. Elizabeth Warren and Sen. Bernie Sanders have gone further, saying that the growth of any new charters should be halted.

Others are more willing to accept charter schools, including Michael Bloomberg, who expanded them during his 12 years leading New York City — but he recently told the *Times/Herald* that he opposes vouchers.

McCluskey, from the Cato Institute, said this shows how the candidates are tacking left, at least in the primary.

Trump campaigned on the promise to create a national voucher program, an idea that hasn't gained much traction because it would divert federal funding away from public schools. But he urged Congress in his State of the Union to take up a different federal tax credit scholarship proposal, calling it “the next step forward in building an inclusive society.”

Lines like that worried CNN commentator Van Jones, a former Obama adviser, who called Trump's remarks to Congress a “warning shot across the bow” not to take black voters for granted.

“We've got to wake up, folks,” Jones said right after Trump's Feb. 4 speech. “I think what you're going to see him do is say, ‘You may not like my rhetoric, but look at my results, my record,’ to black people, and if he narrow-casts that it's going to be effective.”

T. Willard Fair, the longtime leader of Miami's Urban League and an advocate of charter schools and vouchers, is hoping Jones is right.

He is voting for Trump because of his education policies, and is hoping other African Americans join him.

“I'm concerned about the education of black children, and Donald Trump knows there are a lot of us who feel that way,” Fair said. “I can't say he's pandering. That's what running for elective office is. You find out what groups want, you offer to do it and then you get something done.”