



The Mary McLeod Bethune Memorial in Washington DC

Let's Honor Bethune with a New K-12 Scholarship Program

By William Mattox

Director, J. Stanley Marshall
Center for Educational Options



J. STANLEY MARSHALL
CENTER *for*
EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS
at The James Madison Institute

Two decades ago, while on a business trip to Rome, I made an unexpected discovery when I went to exchange dollars into (pre-euro) liras: The Italian equivalent of our one-dollar bill featured a portrait of legendary educator Maria Montessori.

That's right, long before the U.S. government's 2016 decision to put Harriet Tubman on future \$20 bills, the Italians gave the "George Washington treatment" to a woman – and, perhaps even more notably, an educator. By honoring Maria Montessori on a denomination of currency that ordinary citizens used on an everyday basis, the Italians made certain that their most famous teacher never escaped public consciousness – which said a lot about their high esteem for Montessori.

I've been thinking about that experience in Rome as the State of Florida has been looking for a way to honor a legendary female educator of our own: Mary McLeod Bethune, who founded the Daytona school for African-American girls that grew into what is today Bethune-Cookman University.

As some have suggested, it would be a fitting stroke of poetic justice for a statue of Bethune to replace Confederate General Edmund Kirby Smith as one of the two statues representing the State of Florida in the U.S. Capitol's Statuary Hall. (The Florida Legislature passed a 2016 measure calling for Smith's replacement;

and Bethune is one of the three finalists for this honor.)

Even though there's already a splendid statue of Bethune, flanked by two young students, a dozen blocks east of the U.S. Capitol, it's easy to see why Floridians would want this great lady to represent our state inside Statuary Hall.

Bethune led a remarkable life of service and achievement. In addition to founding her Daytona school and nurturing its development, she gave leadership to a number of organizations dedicated to advancing the lives of black people, including the National Council of Negro Women. Bethune served five different U.S. presidents in various advisory and administrative roles, most notably as a member of FDR's "Black Cabinet." And Bethune's indomitable spirit and longstanding dedication to young people inspired many Floridians, including JMI founder J. Stanley Marshall. (See sidebar on page 4.)

Given all of this, it's not surprising that Mary McLeod Bethune would be a leading candidate for recognition in the U.S. Capitol's Statuary Hall. Still, it'd be a shame if Florida schoolchildren had to travel hundreds of miles to Washington, D.C. to see Bethune get her proper due. So, regardless of how the Statuary Hall matter is resolved, it's time to find a highly-visible way to pay tribute to Bethune here in Florida. And the most obvious – and most meaningful – way to honor Bethune's legacy would be to name a universal K-12

scholarship program after her.

After all, Bethune is best known for her pioneering work with young students. And, more than anything else, she wanted to be remembered as an educator. "I leave you a thirst for education," Bethune wrote in her oft-quoted *Last Will and Testament*. "Knowledge is the prime need of the hour."

Since it's common for scholarship programs to pay tribute to prominent educators and champions of education – Jefferson, Fulbright, Pell, Rhodes, McKay, Gardiner, etc. – it would be fitting for Florida to name a new K-12 scholarship program after Bethune.

Thus, this essay not only will call for the State of Florida to create such a scholarship, but it also will argue that this new program ought to have three distinguishing characteristics symbolic of Bethune's legacy: (1) universal access; (2) diverse usage; and (3) rewards for resourcefulness.

Let's look at each of these characteristics more closely.

Universal Access

Nothing distinguished Bethune's career more than her desire to see good educational opportunities provided to *all* schoolchildren. This was the animating spirit behind the founding of her Daytona school, which educated black children who were denied access to their local public schools. And it was the animating idea behind her vocal advocacy for education reform.

"There can be no discrimination, no segregation, no separation of some citizens from the rights which belong to all," Bethune wrote in an article that appeared in the *Chicago Defender*. "We must gain full equality in education."

Interestingly, Bethune offered a glimpse of what true integration looks like when she held Open House meetings at her school so that people could come and witness firsthand her students' accomplishments. "Many tourists attended, sitting wherever there were empty seats," a Daytona resident reported. "There was no special section for white people."

And there was no division by wealth, either. Indeed, one of the secrets to Bethune's success was her ability to move easily among different social classes, engendering the trust of poor, illiterate Daytona families as well as rich, powerful benefactors from other parts of the nation (including the Rockefellers, Kaisers, and Gambles – all of whom helped finance her school).

Bethune believed that showcasing the achievements

of her schoolchildren – and of prominent blacks in history – played an important role in building the confidence and self-respect of her students. "If our people are to fight their way up out of bondage, we must arm them with the sword and the shield and buckler of pride – belief in themselves and their possibilities, based upon a sure knowledge of the achievements of the past," she observed.

At the same time, Bethune believed that the accomplishments of black people should be celebrated throughout American society, and not just in the black community. "Not only the Negro child but children of all races should read and know of the achievements, accomplishments and deeds of the Negro," she wrote.

Given Bethune's interest in reaching *all* schoolchildren, a new scholarship named after her ought to be available to *all* Florida K-12 students, regardless of race or income. And while it is certainly appropriate for education policy to show a special concern for disadvantaged populations – just as Bethune did – this concern can be demonstrated best by providing larger scholarship amounts for low-income students rather than by limiting scholarship eligibility only to disadvantaged students.

Indeed, Arizona's new "universal" scholarship program (which ought to serve as a loose model for Florida reformers) is a two-tiered program that provides greater resources to students from low-income families than to other students. This sliding-scale funding feature gives schools an added incentive to enroll students from disadvantaged backgrounds, while building a broad constituency of both poor and non-poor families to protect the scholarship from the kinds of "bullying" attacks we've seen waged in Florida against programs narrowly focused on low-income students. (Sadly, scholarship programs serving only the most vulnerable have been the target of several legal challenges filed by the teachers union; at the same time, broad-based educational programs available to all incomes – like the Bright Futures Scholarship for college students – have enjoyed wide public support.)

Still, some might question whether a new Bethune scholarship, reaching all students, is actually needed. After all, Florida schools ended racial segregation a half-century ago; public schools are now open to all students; targeted scholarship programs now exist for low-income students and those with special needs; and the Florida Legislature recently passed a "Schools of Hope" charter school initiative to help students trapped

in chronically-failing public schools.

The problem with this line of thinking is that it assumes that all Florida families and students are being served well by existing education policy. In truth, many aren't.

Many working-class and middle-income families feel trapped in mediocre public schools. They are neither poor enough to qualify for low-income educational assistance nor rich enough to be able to pay out of pocket for a private school education (on top of the taxes they are required to pay into the public school system). And while some form of public school choice (charters, magnets, or open enrollment) is a viable option for some families, many would prefer a wider array of affordable options. In fact, a recent EdChoice survey found that just over half (52 percent) of all parents believe private schooling or home schooling would most benefit their child. (And public district schools were the top preference of only 28 percent of the respondents.)

Given these findings, it seems odd that public policymakers would make it harder for working-class and middle-income families to exercise the choice they most want – by denying them access to the per-pupil funds for their children's education – especially in view of the many success stories from home-, private-, and hybrid-school populations. (See, for example, the sidebar about the Wood family on page 8.)

That a K-12 student might find some schooling arrangements more conducive to learning than others should not surprise us. College students often eschew the university closest to their home in favor of one that is larger ... or smaller ... or excels in a particular discipline ... or aligns with their values and priorities ... or draws students with similar interests ... or distinguishes itself in some other way. If, as a college admissions officer once told me, the three most important letters in determining where a student should go to college are F-I-T, then why should we expect it to be any different with K-12 students?

Put another way, if we can readily acknowledge that no single college or university is a good fit for every

► *While it may be of some interest to Johnny's parents that the school he attends is an 'A' school in a 'good' school district, these 'macro' measures of group success aren't worth a hill of beans to Johnny's parents if Johnny's particular educational needs aren't being well met.*



Thousand lira note featuring Maria Montessori

single student – and even Harvard has students who transfer to other schools – then why should we expect any K-12 school to be a good fit for every single student that lives in a particular zip code?

Elevating the importance of “fit-ness” in schooling choices and K-12 education policy is desperately needed in our day. Too much of our public debate surrounding K-12 education is focused on “macro” measures of academic success that assess the aggregate performance of schools or districts or other groupings and too little is focused on “micro” measures of student

achievement that assess the progress of the individual student.

Yet, education should be, first and foremost, about the individual student. And while it may be of some interest to Johnny’s parents that the school he attends is an “A” school in a “good” school district, these macro measures of group success aren’t worth a hill of beans to Johnny’s parents if Johnny’s particular educational needs are not being well met.

Public policymakers, then, need to adopt a student-centered approach to education. They need to fund

students, not schools. And they need to view all matters related to K-12 education primarily through the eyes of parents (who have a personal stake in a particular student) rather than through the eyes of school officials (who feel a professional responsibility for aggregate groupings and large-scale structures and centralized systems).

The best way for public officials to adopt a student-centered approach to education is to create a new universal scholarship program that gives *every* child and *every* family the widest possible educational

options to choose from – so that *all* schoolchildren can have access to the types of learning opportunities they most want and need.

Diverse Usage

Imagine, for a moment, what would happen if restaurants operated under the same rules and regulations that govern public schools in America today. Presumably, a family of four zoned for a local restaurant offering old-fashioned comfort food could

Mary McLeod Bethune: A Florida Treasure

By J. Stanley Marshall

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The following is a reprint of a 2004 article written by JMI founder J. Stanley Marshall for The Tallahassee Democrat. Dr. Marshall served for many years on the Board of Trustees at Bethune-Cookman College and was a long-time admirer of Mary McLeod Bethune. In fact, one day I went to meet with him in his office soon after JMI had moved to its current location. All along the floorboards were various pictures, awards, and memorabilia waiting to be hung on his office walls – including a photograph of Dr. Marshall with British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Yet, behind his desk, there was one (and only one) item that Dr. Marshall had taken the time to hang on the wall himself. It was a large photograph of Mary McLeod Bethune; and its prominence spoke volumes about just how much Dr. Marshall drew inspiration from Bethune's exemplary life.*

The Tallahassee Democrat recently carried a short biographical piece on Mary McLeod Bethune in recognition of Black History Month. Floridians most of all should celebrate her, for it was here that she contributed most generously to education, human rights and progress in

race relations.

She founded Bethune-Cookman College exactly 100 years ago and Floridians will have the opportunity this year to recognize this great lady's accomplishments. She had a keen mind, a rare combination of courage and tolerance, and boundless faith in humanity—traits that one finds too rarely in leaders today, irrespective of race.

In 1930, the president of Rollins College in Winter Park had invited Mrs. Bethune to speak at a student assembly, but was then told by his board that the college had never had an African-American. appear on its platform and this was not the time. The president called on Mrs. Bethune in Daytona Beach and told her that he was so ashamed and humiliated that he was going to resign.

But Mrs. Bethune urged him not to do so, telling him that his students needed his leadership more than they needed to hear her speak. Twenty years later, in 1949, she was awarded an honorary degree by Rollins College in what she later described as one of the most rewarding experiences of her life.

Mary Jane McLeod was born in a cabin

near Mayesville, S.C., to a father and mother 10 years removed from slavery, the 15th child in a family in which father, mother and children plowed the fields, chopped crabgrass and picked cotton. During visits to the homes of white families with her mother when they delivered the wash, she hoped for nothing as much as to live in a house with windows.

She also noticed that those folks seemed different, and those differences, she thought, came about because they read books. She prayed that God would help her to learn to read and become educated.

When she was 9 years old, Mary Jane was selected by a missionary from the Presbyterian Church to attend a new school being built in Mayesville. There she learned to read the Bible. Her prayers were answered yet again when a visiting Quaker lady offered her a scholarship to Scotia Seminary in Concord, N.C. At Scotia, she decided to dedicate her life to Christian missions in Africa.

But God had other plans for Mary Jane, and she was awarded a scholarship to attend Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. She later began teaching in the Haines

Institute in Augusta, Ga. Soon after, she met Alfred Bethune, a teacher in a mission school in South Carolina, and they were married in 1898.

But the call to educate her young son and other children was strong, and she heard that a railroad was being built along Florida's east coast. She moved to Daytona Beach and found the families of black workers living in abject poverty. In 1904, Mrs. Bethune rented a building near the tracks for \$11 a month to teach the children of those families. She raised the money by selling sweet potato pies to the people of Daytona Beach.

Thus was founded the Daytona Educational and Industrial Training School for Negro Girls. Its first students were five little black girls and her 5-year old son, Albert.

God continued to bless Mary McLeod Bethune by bringing her work to the attention of several wealthy families who spent their winters in the area: John D. Rockefeller; industrialist Henry J. Kaiser; and James N. Gamble of Proctor & Gamble. Mrs. Bethune and the Rockefeller family remained close friends throughout her life.

It was only natural that this extraordinary lady would come to the attention of prominent people in Washington. In 1934 she was invited to the White House to counsel President Roosevelt on the National Youth Administration. FDR

admired Mrs. Bethune and she became a familiar figure in the White House. The cane that is seen in most of her photographs was one of the president's, given to her by Mrs. Roosevelt after his death.

When Harry Truman became president, he appointed her to the National Civil Defense Commission under the direction of Millard Caldwell, a former Florida governor. She was named one of the nation's 50 outstanding women and was awarded honorary degrees by eight colleges and universities, including Rollins College.

By 1923, the school was merged with the Cookman Institute in Jacksonville, and was named Bethune-Cookman College, which is today one of the nation's top historic black colleges and universities. Having made so much progress in race relations but still having so far to go, we can only hope for leaders with Mrs. Bethune's faith and heart and mind.

Perhaps her greatest legacy is her Last Will and Testament, a small book that she wrote before she died in 1955. In it, she spells out her bequests to all of us, but especially to her fellow blacks.

"I leave you love. Love builds. It is more beneficial than hate.

"I leave you a thirst for education. Knowledge is the prime need of the hour.

"I leave you racial dignity. I want Negroes



Mary McLeod Bethune's portrait by Betsy Graves Reyneau on view at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery

to maintain their human dignity at all costs.

"I leave you a desire to live in harmony with your fellow man.

"I leave you finally a responsibility to our young people. Our children must never lose their zeal for building a better world.

"The Freedom Gates are half ajar. We must pry them fully open."

Could anyone today, black or white, say it better?

Former president of Florida State University Stanley Marshall is chairman of the board of trustees at Bethune-Cookman College.



Source: State Archives of Florida

insignificant – quite the opposite. But the reason they are so highly charged and divisive is because the stakes are so great. In a one-size-fits-all system of public education, it’s impossible to address all sorts of competing concerns to everyone’s satisfaction.

Yet, there’s no reason why we must have a plain vanilla system of education for everyone. Rather than perpetuating uniformity in K-12 schooling, policymakers should give all parents access to a Bethune Scholarship that allows them to find the learning option – or combination of options – that most closely meets their child’s needs and their family’s preferences.

Put another way, the universal Bethune Scholarship should be modeled after the recently-adopted Gardiner Scholarship for special-needs children. The Gardiner Scholarship is to 21st Century education policy what Bethune’s private school was to 20th Century educational practices – a much-needed development that elevates the unique worth of each child above the entrenched interests of the existing education establishment.

Under Gardiner, per-pupil funds for special-needs students are placed into a Personal Learning Scholarship Account (PLSA) which parents can draw upon to obtain a wide array of educational resources tailored to their child’s unique needs (including workbooks, diagnostic tests, online courses, tutoring, tuition, educational software, speech therapy, etc.). Importantly, these learning services can be bundled together at a single school or they can be obtained in an unbundled fashion from multiple education providers.

As such, the Gardiner Scholarship expands the educational marketplace much like Bethune’s private school did a century ago. It gives new options to students whose needs are not being well met by their local district. And it implicitly acknowledges that what one family might value most in educating its children may not be what another family values most.

On this last concern, I am reminded of a couple that chose to remove their son from the local public school (and enroll him in a private school) over concerns about the U.S. History curriculum. For these parents, discovering that the school’s U.S. History curriculum devoted nary a word to the D-Day invasion proved to be the last straw.

Now, the point here isn’t to debate how much instructional time ought to be devoted to the D-Day invasion -- or any number of other historical events. The point here is to question whether taxpayers who want

their child to learn about D-Day ought to be forced, in effect, to pay out-of-pocket for that opportunity.

Rather than penalizing parents for seeking out an educational program that aligns with their priorities, a Bethune Scholarship would allow parents to direct the per-pupil monies set aside for their child’s education to the learning program(s) of their choosing. Not only would this help put an end to the often-divisive “high stakes” public battles over K-12 education content and priorities, but it would help create more space for legitimate preferential differences to coexist.

Take, for example, the always-thorny issue of how religion is addressed in education. Just as it would be highly inappropriate for any group of taxpayers to force their religion on other people’s children (by, say, indoctrinating school prayer), it would be equally inappropriate for another group of citizens to deny their neighbors the freedom to use Personal Learning Scholarship monies to send a child to a faith-based school like the one Bethune founded.

Given this, any scholarship named for Bethune ought to allow parents to use their PLSA monies at private schools (like hers), faith-based schools (like hers), vocational training programs (like hers), and a vast array of other educational options – including the “student-directed” and “hands-on” learning programs championed by Maria Montessori, John Holt, and other innovative liberal educators.

Will all of us like the education choices that other families make? Of course not. (Just think about how University of Florida alums react when they learn that their neighbors’ child is headed to Florida State University!) But living in a free society means that we need to affirm the right of other families to make decisions that we wouldn’t make ourselves.

Interestingly, a recent research review by Greg Forster of EdChoice (formerly the Friedman Foundation) found that programs that give parents the freedom to enroll their children in private schools actually do a better job of promoting religious and political tolerance than do one-size-fits-all public schools. Writing at *The Federalist*, Josh Wester helps explain this result:

[A]llowing people to be honest about and pursue their deepest beliefs gives them empathy for people who have different core beliefs. They are better able to put themselves in other people’s shoes and [to do so] voluntarily, rather than being forced to negotiate religious disagreements through the political system,

like public schools now require. What politicizes and increases conflicts in education is running it through a central government monopoly rather than decentralizing it to let the education families choose align with, rather than contradict, their core beliefs.

So, the Bethune Scholarship ought to celebrate diversity. It ought to allow a wide array of educational options. And it ought to give parents – who know and love their children more than anyone – the freedom to make decisions about how to allocate the per-pupil dollars set aside for the education of each child.

Rewards for Resourcefulness

One of the most remarkable – and least appreciated – aspects of Bethune’s legacy is her resourcefulness. Bethune began her school with \$1.50 in her pocket. She built desks and benches for her students out of discarded crates and boxes. And they baked and sold pies to tourists and local construction crews as a way of raising money for their school.

When it came to education, Bethune believed in offering the highest possible quality at the lowest possible cost. And while some might say Bethune’s thriftiness was an absolute necessity in her less-affluent day, maximizing bang-for-buck ought to be a priority in education at all times in all places.

Sadly, public education in America generally does a very poor job of maximizing value. The problem isn’t that public school officials are unusually derelict in carrying out their duties. The problem is one of basic economic incentives.

The late great economist Milton Friedman frequently observed that there are four possible ways to spend money. People can either spend their money or

not opt to go to a new Italian restaurant unless they were able to convince enough of their neighbors to elect public officials who support “restaurant choice.”

This sounds – and is – absurd; yet, it serves to illustrate a very important point related to the question of a school’s “fit-ness” for a particular student. Namely, there is no single school or schooling model that can truly meet the preferences of all K-12 students. That’s because there’s no philosophy of education

to which all Americans subscribe, no unanimous agreement about what the ultimate purpose of education should be, and no pedagogical practice that all educators believe is unquestionably best in every situation.

Sure, there’s a lot of overlap between various philosophies and pedagogies. But there are

some important differences, too. And these almost-always-legitimate differences help to explain why the public debate over education frequently degenerates into highly-charged, often-divisive squabbles over curriculum content (Common Core, sex education, American exceptionalism, multiculturalism, etc.), teaching methods (“new” math, online learning, “drill and kill” fact memorization, etc.), and educational priorities (emphasis on STEM disciplines, arts and music education, etc.).

Needless to say, these debates aren’t trivial or

► *A recent research review found that programs that give parents the freedom to enroll their children in private schools actually do a better job of promoting religious and political tolerance than do one-size-fits-all public schools.*

► *Will all of us like the education choices that other families make? Of course not. (Just think about how University of Florida alums react when they learn that their neighbors’ child is headed to Florida State University!) But living in a free society means that we need to affirm the right of other families to make decisions that we wouldn’t make ourselves.*

someone else's; and they can either spend money on themselves or spend it on others.

When people spend their own money on themselves – as say, when they buy cell phones or laptops or flat-screen TVs – they tend to seek the greatest possible value for their money. (Not surprisingly, then, consumers today can buy much better quality personal electronic devices at markedly lower prices than they could a decade or more ago.)

When people spend their own money on goods or services that will be used by others – such as when citizens pay taxes for government programs they will not be using themselves – they tend to care a lot about minimizing cost and to care relatively little about

the quality of the good or service provided. There are exceptions to this rule, obviously – such as when people give gifts altruistically – but Friedman argued that economizing is usually a high priority when people are spending on others, especially when the payer does not have a personal connection to the one receiving the goods or services.

Conversely, when consumers spend other people's money on themselves – as say, with most health care expenditures in America today – they tend to care a great deal about the quality of what they receive but to care relatively little about the cost (especially after they've met their deductible). Indeed, most health care consumers do not even know what various medical

procedures cost today.

Finally, when people spend someone else's money on goods and services that will be used primarily by other people – such as when politicians and bureaucrats spend money on public schools – they have less incentive to go the extra mile in maximizing quality and minimizing cost than do others. "As competent and well-meaning as they [education officials] may be, their incentives to economize and maximize value are simply not as strong as those of parents spending their own money on their own children," note education scholars Jason Bedrick and Lindsey Burke.

Given this, the way America funds education is virtually guaranteed to result in wasteful spending and

less-than-stellar results. Indeed, over the last 50 years, inflation-adjusted spending on K-12 education in the U.S. has tripled, yet student test scores on the SAT and National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) have remained flat.

Adopting a Bethune Scholarship for all Florida K-12 students (modeled after the Gardiner Scholarship) would go a long way towards addressing the incentive problems in education policy. By allowing parents to use education dollars in a variety of ways – and to roll over any unused funds for future educational needs (including college) – Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts encourage parents to be resourceful and seek out learning opportunities that offer the highest

The Customized Education of R.J. & Trinity Wood

By William Mattox

■ When their first child began to approach school age, Fredericka "Freddi" Wood and her husband Robert both felt uneasy about sending R.J. to the local public school.

"The problem with some of the schools we have right now is that the way they'll often present a lesson or subject may not be the best way that a particular child receives information," Robert says. "As a result, some students get left behind, and I think that's one of the main problems we see in our community today."

As Freddi and Robert contemplated their options, a typical private school experience seemed out of the question for financial reasons. (The Woods are a middle-income family that now has five dependent children living at home.) And while their curiosity had been piqued by a homeschooling family with two "very intelligent and respectful" daughters, Freddi found the prospect of go-it-alone homeschooling very intimidating.

"The best thing I could figure out was to find some kind of program or school that could assist me," she said. "Thankfully, we

found a school where R.J. could go one day a week to class with a teacher and then do the other days at home with me."

That initial "hybrid school" experience provided a great deal of structure – the schoolteacher even developed lesson plans for Freddi and other parents to follow at home with their children. And while the Woods benefited from this arrangement, over time they gravitated to a different hybrid school in their area that offered a more flexible "university" model of instruction.* Thus, R.J. (who is now in high school) and Trinity (his middle-school sister) currently take some courses taught in the classroom and others that they do at home and/or online.

"One of the things that we love about the school we're a part of is the leaders there really feed the passion of the student," Freddi observes. "Whether it's the arts or aviation, they try to reach students at the level that they are passionate."

Trinity, who has worked as a child actress in shows at Orlando's prestigious Repertory Theatre, says her hybrid schooling ar-

rangement facilitates her involvement in the performing arts. "I like having a mix of both homeschooling and private school," Trinity says. "It's so easy to do the shows that I want to do, because my schooling and curriculum are so flexible."

R.J. also likes the flexibility of hybrid schooling and the freedom it gives him to pursue his interests in robotics and aviation. (R.J. is a member of a local youth robotics team that has competed in a national competition; and he began taking flight lessons before he was even old enough to drive a car.)

"I like being able to focus more on math and science," R.J. says. And he also enjoys sharing his knowledge with younger students. Over the last year, R.J. has been tutoring two autistic boys in chemistry through a faith-based cooperative learning program in which his family participates. "Everyone should be a teacher," R.J. says. "Sharing what you know with others helps them learn – and it strengthens your grasp of the material as well."

Another thing the Woods like about hy-

brid schooling is the freedom it gives them to tailor instruction to the learning style of each child. "I remember choosing a history curriculum for Trinity based on the fact that she loves stories," Freddi reports. "This curriculum basically told history through personal stories, so she loved that."

Robert believes customizing education in this manner cultivates his children's love of learning. "Allowing our kids to pursue their particular dreams makes them so incredibly passionate," he says. "They become self-learners. They strive – they want to find ways to achieve their particular goals."

"We foot the bill for everything," Freddi notes (since current education policy denies parents access to the per-pupil funds that would be spent on their child if they were to enroll in a school that lets public officials call all the shots).

This means the Woods have to make some financial sacrifices. Three of their kids share a bedroom. Mom and Dad typically drive older cars. The family eats out infrequently. And there isn't a substantial college fund for any of the children.

Nevertheless, Freddi and Robert harbor no ill will towards those (often-more-affluent) families that send their children to tuition-free public schools. And the Woods



JMI's Becky Liner welcomes Trinity and R.J. Wood to Tallahassee, along with their parents, Freddi and Robert, and their kid sister, Samyra.

say they feel "blessed" to live in a country where economic and religious freedom remain cherished ideals.

Still, an outside observer can't help but note how ironic – and unjust – it is that exceptional families like the Woods are treated like "second-class citizens" today. Indeed, current policy expects taxpayers like the Woods to help pick up the tab for educating other Americans' children -- and the tab for schooling those who are not yet

U.S. citizens – while denying them access to the per-pupil funds that would be spent on their children if the Woods were willing to cede control of their child's education to the existing establishment.

"Obviously, we believe in what we are doing," Freddi says. Yet, she's quick to add that just because hybrid schooling works for her family doesn't mean this option "is going to be right for every child."

"Ultimately, the responsibility for educating our children is ours – it's the parents," Freddi says. "We should have the flexibility to be able to make choices for our individual children." Without being penalized by the government.

Here's hoping that the Woods – and thousands of other families like them – will soon be granted access to their children's per-pupil funds through a Bethune Scholarship that defrays education expenses.

For a closer look at the "hybrid school" the Woods attend, watch the short documentary, "Taking Flight" or read JMI's Policy Brief, "The Wave of the Future: Why 'Micro' Education Merits Greater Attention from Policymakers." Both are available online at www.jamesmadison.org

possible quality at the lowest possible price.

As such, PLSAs are superior to all other forms of education financing, including private school vouchers that provide a predetermined fixed sum for parents to use in purchasing “bundled” services (tuition). When

parents can shop for “unbundled” services – and can plow any savings back into other learning benefits for their child – families (and taxpayers!) get the best possible return on their financial investment.

Giving parents greater freedom to make choices about their children’s schooling not only means we’ll get better education providers over time (as the cream rises to the top and the mediocre go out of business), but it also means we’ll get better parents as well. That’s because in every neighborhood and at every income level, when a mother learns that a neighbor’s child is flourishing in a program which would also benefit

her child, she doesn’t typically sit on her hands and settle for status quo mediocrity. She seeks to enroll her child in that program. We see this all the time with extracurricular activities (like youth sports) where parents have agency. And we’d see it even more in K-12 education if parents could direct how their child’s per-pupil dollars were allocated.

Sadly, America’s public school monopoly greatly limits parents’ ability to take meaningful action on behalf of their children. The public school system engenders parental passivity. It denies parents agency. It tells parents that school officials who “know more” about education (but care less about their particular child) should make all the important decisions surrounding that child’s formal learning.

Adopting a Bethune Scholarship would help change all that. It would empower parents to take responsibility for their children’s education. And it would acknowledge that parents naturally possess something that no school district official, no matter how expert, can be expected to have – an unrivaled concern for the well-being of a particular child.

Indeed, public policymakers need to ask themselves this question: would Florida students benefit more from having per-pupil funds go into a general budget that their local school boards control or into a personal learning account that their parents control?

Or, to put it another way, whom should policymakers trust more to make decisions about how a particular child’s per-pupil funds are spent – the parents who know and love that child more than anyone or a group of school district officials who don’t even know that child by name?

Incremental Steps

In a perfect world, every Florida K-12 student would have access to a Bethune Scholarship right away. Without delay. Because there is an urgent need for major K-12 reform that every parent readily understands: a child is only a first grader once. So, any year lost waiting for legislative action is a year that a student cannot get back.

With this urgency for bold action in mind, the state of Arizona in 2017 adopted a new Educational Savings Account (ESA) program for virtually all interested K-12 students. (ESAs are another name for what Florida calls PLSAs.) Importantly, the Arizona program authorized a higher per-pupil payment (roughly \$500) for low-income students, thereby giving schools a greater incentive to serve these disadvantaged students.

In addition, Arizona found a very novel and impressive way to implement its program incrementally over time. Specifically, Arizona adopted a grade-based phase-in strategy that begins with students in grade K, 1, 6, and 9 – the most common entry points for students to enter or change schools – and then adds additional grades each year as these initial students advance. This cascading plan balances the need for speed in reaching as many students as possible with the need for care in minimizing transition problems.

Florida policymakers would be wise to adopt this same phase-in strategy for reaching universal eligibility. And they would be wise to improve upon Arizona’s model by making certain that Florida’s new Bethune Scholarship contains no “prior public school enrollment” requirement (just as our Gardiner Scholarship for special-needs children contains no such constraint). Denying eligibility to taxpaying Floridians who have never used the public school system is hard to justify – especially since free public schooling is

offered to other groups who have never significantly contributed to the state’s tax base (such as newcomers moving into the state). And while some might assume that all families currently educating their children outside the public school system can easily afford to do so, this is not only untrue for many working-class and middle-income families, but it also misses the larger point: Education is, or at least should be, about children – about finding the very best learning environment for every child to succeed. Sometimes, the best fit for a child will happen to be the public school located closest to his home. But sometimes it will be an independent learning program – or combination of programs – that a child accesses online or by traveling across town. The goal of public education should be to serve citizens, not to reward or punish families based on whether their kids attend the establishment’s preferred schools.

Moreover, if it is appropriate for state funds to be used to educate a wealthy family’s oldest child in a public school – and no one currently objects to free public schooling for the affluent – then it is no less appropriate for comparable per-pupil funds to be placed into a Bethune Scholarship account for those

same parents to use in educating their youngest child in a different learning environment that is better suited to meeting that child’s particular needs.

Thus, whatever else Florida policymakers choose to do, means-testing the Bethune Scholarship ought to be avoided at all costs. Because means-testing leaves low-income students vulnerable to yet another legal attack. Means-testing overlooks many “forgotten” working-class and middle-income families who want a wide array of alternatives to their existing district school. And means-testing undermines the inclusive spirit behind the Bethune Scholarship – which is designed to uphold Mary McLeod Bethune as an inspiration to all Floridians of every color and creed and socio-economic background.

Remembering ‘Forgotten’ and ‘Overlooked’ Families

When Mary McLeod Bethune launched her Daytona school more than a century ago, everyone in her school community understood that they were the victims of

a “rigged” public school system that regarded some schoolchildren as less worthy than others. Indeed, the system was so obviously rigged that no one today would dare to defend overtly segregated schools.

Yet, today, we still have a rigged system of K-12 education in many ways. We still have many de facto segregated public schools. We still have a pernicious Blaine Amendment that codifies bigotry against Catholics and other families who want an education that aligns with their spiritual values. And we still have a system that poorly serves “square peg” students who need something other than “round hole” public education.

To be sure, today’s public school system masks its biases better than it did a century ago. But today’s system is still very much rigged in favor of those who are in, or who support, the educational establishment. And the system is still very much rigged against many parents who want their child to get an education that is consistent with their family’s learning priorities.

Adopting a Bethune Scholarship would give every Florida child a K-12 education tailored to meet his or her unique needs. It would pay tribute to a courageous Florida educator and carry forward her faith-informed belief in each child’s unique worth and dignity. More than anything, adopting a Bethune Scholarship would ensure that every child in the state of Florida – every child – has the opportunity to receive a K-12 education tailored to his or her unique needs, interests, aptitudes, and learning style.

And, truly, what could be any better than that?

William Mattox is the director of the J. Stanley Marshall Center for Educational Options at The James Madison Institute, and the father of four children, all of whom graduated from public high schools. He served on the Tallahassee Civil Rights Landmark Committee.



Mary M. Bethune visiting the White House
Source: State Archives of Florida



Eleanor Roosevelt visits
Bethune-Cookman College
Source: State Archives of Florida



Source: State Archives of Florida

A Gamble Helped Black Students Thrive

By William Mattox

■ Something curious happened at a Black History Month program held at Florida A&M University last week. An actress portraying African-American educator Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955) praised someone with a demographic profile eerily similar to Betsy DeVos, who earlier that day was confirmed by the Senate as education secretary. As the program unfolded, it became easy to see why the performer decided to speak up.

When Bethune started her Daytona School for Negro Girls in 1904, the education establishment had little interest in seeing young black children receive good instruction. So she looked elsewhere for help. Bethune reached out to James N. Gamble, son of the Procter & Gamble co-founder and a regular vacationer in Daytona. Bethune told Gamble she wanted more than money. She needed someone who would share her vision for giving underprivileged black children more opportunities.

Gamble was so impressed with Bethune and her students

that he bought into her vision—wholeheartedly. He not only became the chairman of Bethune's school, but enlisted the support of other wealthy businessmen, including John D. Rockefeller.

The influx of financial resources helped. Bethune had previously made school desks out of discarded boxes and crates, and ink for pens out of elderberry juice. But outside funding didn't solve everything.

During her performance last week, Ersula Odom re-enacted the story of how Bethune and her students huddled one night in their schoolhouse as an angry mob of Ku Klux Klan members assembled outside. Suddenly, the voice of one schoolgirl pierced the darkness, singing the comforting hymn "God Will Take Care of You." When Bethune and the other students joined in the resounding chorus, the Klansmen realized that they were up against forces they dare not cross. Sheepishly, they turned and walked away.

I realize some people think Mrs. DeVos should be disqualified from public service because she supports giving students more opportunities, including the option of attending faith-based schools where such hymns are often sung today. But I see in Mrs. DeVos echoes of James N. Gamble—another Midwestern Protestant Republican who inherited a family cleaning-products fortune. Like Gamble, Mrs. DeVos has given generously to help disadvantaged kids receive a good education, and she has fully bought into a philosophy that places the needs of children ahead of the interests of the education establishment.

That's something that should give pause to all of the new education secretary's detractors—especially those who last Friday stood in a schoolhouse door to block Mrs. DeVos from entering.

This article originally ran in the February 15, 2017 edition of The Wall Street Journal.



✉ The James Madison Institute
The Columns
100 North Duval Street
Tallahassee, FL 32301

☎ 850.386.3131

🌐 www.jamesmadison.org

Stay Connected

📘 The James Madison Institute
🐦 @JmsMadisonInst
📺 [youtube.com/user/JamesMadisonInstitute](https://www.youtube.com/user/JamesMadisonInstitute)
📷 [flickr.com/photos/jmsmadisoninst](https://www.flickr.com/photos/jmsmadisoninst)
📌 [pinterest.com/jmsmadisoninst](https://www.pinterest.com/jmsmadisoninst)