



TIME IS RUNNING OUT.

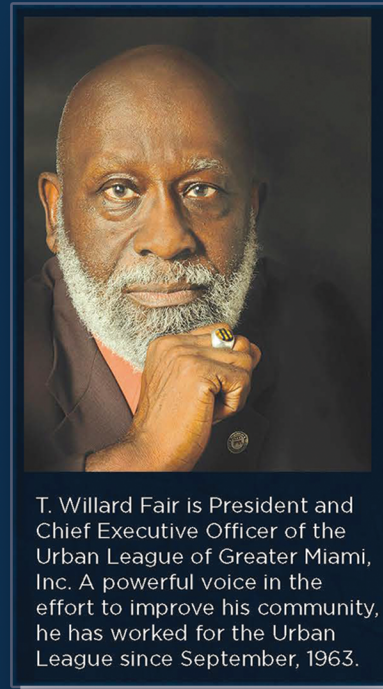
First in a Series of Prominent Leaders of Color on the Importance of Education Opportunity

Once upon a time it may have been unheard of for the head of an urban league dedicated to the improvement of lives for African-American children to partner with a Republican to work on school reform. As part of one of his education reform efforts, Florida governor Jeb Bush convinced me to help him go around that state in an attempt to get school choice legislation passed. I leapt at the opportunity because I was desperately concerned about the lack of quality educational options for children in Liberty City, a neighborhood of the city of Miami where a branch of the urban league is headquartered.

But that one achievement 30 plus years ago created a path that has changed lives for the children not only for Liberty City but children across the state. That is why I am compelled to speak up with deep concern and opposition to the statements of late by the NAACP, whose leadership has begun to ignore the reality of communities like mine, and indeed the conditions of African-American students all over the country.

Here's what I need to say to them, to the people of this nation, to people of color: I am involved in the choice movement because the future of my life and your life depends upon it. Starting the state's first charter school was one of the most significant accomplishments of my life. Because of our willingness to look beyond traditional divisions and leave beyond our tendency to only work with those with whom we are comfortable, our children of color are closing the achievement gap. African-American students in charter schools are scoring 4% higher than those in traditional public schools and are more likely to attend college. Hispanic students do 12% better than their peers at traditional public schools. These are but two of the many indicators that point to increased success for students of color because their families were empowered to find schools that better met the needs of their children.

Far too many people and organizations, like the NAACP, refuse to acknowledge this. Their recent recommendations to curb charter schools, reduce their numbers and their independence, are wrong, and they expect falsely that all people of color should follow their lead because the color of your skin should dictate who you believe. I have worked a lifetime to change this misperception, to help people see that good policies for our kids do not have a color.



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Too many of our African-American leaders simply defer their beliefs to organizations like the NAACP which once represented our people well. What they must do however is recognize times have changed and we have to have the honest discussions about what we were going to do about our children who continue to be failed by traditional institutions and bureaucracy.

Most important, even when trusted leaders talk about our children, the restoration process can be articulated only by those to whom the children belong, the parents. We can fight. We can mobilize. We can train. We can energize community members. But at the end of the day we have to have informed and trained and energized parents enough and in the right way to lead the charge for what is right for their children. Time is running out. Choice now!

“Choice now” has to be one of the new refrains to “We shall overcome.” We can't wait twenty more years. Time is most certainly running out. The circumstances that we deal with every day in Miami, and I dare say in every major urban area in the United States, are getting worse not better. Time is running out for our communities, and we cannot wait another moment, let alone another decade to with the kind of good choice among good schools that will eventually make a world of difference.

We need to give parents real power over the education available to their children, power that will take many different forms. Choice is at the top of the list.