



A Union of Education, Technical Support, Charter School and Education Support Professionals

## PRESS RELEASE

### **Advocates for education and religious groups file suit to challenge amendment on 2012 ballot**

**Fort Lauderdale, Fla. July 20, 2011** – The Broward Teachers Union’s state affiliate, the Florida Education Association, as well as individuals and groups representing Florida’s public schools and religious community filed a lawsuit today in state Circuit Court in Tallahassee challenging an amendment placed on the ballot by the Florida Legislature that would significantly weaken constitutional protections against separation of church and state and alter the no-aid provision in the Florida Constitution.

**“The real goal of Amendment 7 is to give the state legislature the power to promote taxpayer-financed school vouchers that would require Florida’s tax payers to subsidize private religious schools,”** BTU President Pat Santeramo said. **“With so many charter schools receiving failing grades this year, tax payers should be very suspicious of this effort to give away even more of our tax dollars to private schools that are not held to the same accountability standards as traditional public schools.**

**“Tax payers deserve to know how their money is being spent and the result of how their money is used whether it is a traditional public school, charter school or private religious school. Floridians have good reason to become leery whenever the constitutional line that separates the church and state becomes blurred,”** Santeramo continued.

The constitutional amendment, labeled Amendment 7 by the office of the Secretary of State, would substantially alter the no-aid provision of the Florida Constitution, which has been in effect for more than 125 years. The provision, which is in Article 1, section 3 of the Constitution, protects the religious freedom rights of all Floridians by barring taxpayer-funded aid to religious institutions.

**“The ballot summary adopted by the Legislature are misleading to voters about the impact of Amendment 7,”** said attorney Ron Meyer, who is representing the plaintiffs in the case. **“This is a violation of the requirement that the summary be clear and unambiguous, and must state the legal effect of the ballot proposed.”**

The Broward Teachers Union’s state affiliate, the FEA, which represents BTU’s nearly

13,000 members on the state level, are joined in the lawsuit by Lee Swift of Punta Gorda, who is president of the Florida School Boards Association and a member of the Charlotte County School Board; Susan Summers-Persis of Ormond Beach, who is president of the Florida Association of School Administrators; Rabbi Merrill Shapiro, who is the Rabbi of Temple Shalom in Deltona; the Rev. Kent Siladi of Rockledge, who is the Conference Minister for the Florida Conference of the United Church of Christ; the Rev. Harry Parrott of Clay County, who is a retired Baptist minister; the Rev. Harold Brockus of St. Petersburg, a retired pastor of a Pinellas Park church affiliated with the Presbyterian Church USA and the United Church of Christ; Rabbi Jack Romberg of Temple Israel in Tallahassee; and the Rev. Bobby Musengwa, who is pastor of Maximo Presbyterian Church in St. Petersburg.

“It is for good reason that Florida’s constitution calls for ‘a uniform, efficient, safe, secure, and high quality system of free public schools that allows students to obtain a high quality education.’ “ Shapiro said. “Our tax dollars should be used to further that noble vision, not to fund sectarian religious education.”

The lawsuit also challenges another piece of legislation passed by the Legislature this year that provides that the state attorney general may rewrite a ballot title or summary if the court removes it from the ballot. The lawsuit says that under the Florida Constitution, the Legislature may not delegate its expressed duties to another branch of government.

A copy of the complaint can be found at <http://www.meyerbrookslaw.com/Litigation.htm>.

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Founded in 1969, the Broward Teachers Union organizes and represents about 12,000 members who work for the School Board of Broward County and City of Pembroke Pines as education, technical support, charter school, and education support professionals. It is the second largest local teachers union in Florida and the sixth largest in the nation.

The union’s affiliates include the Florida Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association and the AFL-CIO.