

12th District candidates for Congress split over school vouchers

By Jim Morrill

jmorrill@charlotteobserver.com

Posted: Monday, Apr. 07, 2014

A forum hosting five Democratic congressional candidates erupted into accusations of lying Monday night as they sparred over school vouchers and their records.

The often lively exchange took place at a forum sponsored by the Black Political Caucus of Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

It featured five Democrats running for the 12th Congressional District seat vacated by Democratic U.S. Rep. Mel Watt, who left to head the Federal Housing Finance Agency.

Charlotte attorney Curtis Osborne claimed that two of his rivals – state Rep. Marcus Brandon of High Point and Sen. Malcolm Graham of Charlotte – both supported school vouchers, or public money used for private education.

The Republican-led General Assembly enacted a voucher program last year. “Opportunity Scholarships” would give low-income parents taxpayer money to send their children to private or religious schools.

Brandon, a supporter, said he believes the measure gives low-income families a choice in education. He said he helped target the bill toward poor families. He said failure to be involved would be “political malpractice.”

Graham told Osborne to “tell the truth.” While saying he never voted for vouchers, he said he’s open to charter schools and other education alternatives.

“We cannot be afraid to have the education discussion,” he said.

State Rep. Alma Adams of Greensboro read a litany of voucher bills Graham has supported. In 2011 he sponsored a bill to study the use of “tax benefits” for private education. The bill never left committee.

Adams also responded to Brandon, who accused her of cutting educational spending as a House budget writer several years ago.

Adams, an 11-term lawmaker, took a swipe at her second-term colleague.

“Do your research, Mr. Brandon,” she said. “You’ve only been there three years. You don’t know what you don’t know.”

George Battle III, general counsel for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school board, touted his education credentials, saying he has the experience to influence public policy “from day one.”

“We’re not going to charter and voucher our way to educational success; we know that,” he said. The key to classroom success, he added, is helping communities in the district by supporting such proposals as raising the minimum wage.

Brandon touted his effectiveness in working with Republicans in Raleigh, just as a new congressional representative would have to do in Washington.

A new report released Monday by the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research showed Brandon ranked 73rd among 120 House members in effectiveness this session. Adams ranked 106.

In the Senate, Graham ranked 44th out of 50.

State Sen. Malcolm Graham – District 40 Rankings of Effectiveness, Attendance and Roll Call Voting Participation for the NC General Assembly <small>North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research – www.ncppr.org</small>					
Average	2013	2011	2009*	2007*	2005*
Attendance					
47/50	42/50	48/50	49/50	50/50	48/50
Roll Call Voting Participation					
40/50	35/50	49/50	44/50	36/50	38/50
Effectiveness					
42/50	44/50	46/50	40/50	43/50	39/50

*Democratic Majority in State Senate and House