



2009 **Step Up For Students** Annual Report

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# President's Message



## Dear Friends:

In a crowded school assembly hall in South Florida not long ago, one of our students shared a stage with the state's governor and offered a moving tribute to his many benefactors for giving him a "second chance at success." His name is Antonio Trigo, and his story is similar to those of many inner city youth enrolled in Step Up For Students. Academic and behavioral struggles threatened Antonio's future before his grandmother, empowered with our scholarship, took control of his education and set a new course for her grandson. In this case, Antonio emerged from his challenges and was honored as his eighth-grade's valedictorian.

The support that bolstered Antonio is the same that has facilitated our growth. Step Up For Students soared past an important milestone in 2009 after enrolling more than 27,000 students, an achievement made possible by the commitments of our parents, our schools and our donors as well as our friends in the Legislature and in the public education community who see us as partners in reaching out to students like Antonio.

We have defined progress based on the coalitions we have built, and what progress we have made. We have amassed more bipartisan support in the Legislature and we have established partnerships with public school leaders, notably in the way we offer professional development to our teachers. As Hillsborough school district Superintendent MaryEllen Elia has observed, "Ultimately, we all want to help teachers get better, wherever they're teaching our kids." This recognizes a shared goal: We want to match students with the right learning environment, and this partnership and others like it only strengthen an already robust, customized public education system.

But our outreach has not stopped there. We introduced more people to students like Denisha Merriweather, who brought legislators and business leaders to their feet after telling them about the challenges she overcame moving from school to school until she landed at the Esprit de Corps Center for Learning in Jacksonville with a Step Up For Students Scholarship. Denisha now is college-bound.

Stories like these are a testament to the dedication of the more than 1,000 schools throughout Florida that serve our students. Parents have been empowered to choose the right education for their children, and



**Step Up For Students Chairman and Founder, John Kirtley (far left), and Step Up For Students President, Doug Tuthill (far right), with scholarship students.**

these educators have responded with a commitment that highlights their mission to reach out to low-income families. These efforts and sacrifices underscore the growth our program has experienced.

Our momentum continues to build. John Kirtley, our founder and chairman, and I have shared our vision with public school organizations and state leaders throughout Florida, and we have been received warmly. They all recognize that our students are the ones with the greatest need and they are just as eager to see that need fulfilled. So I'll continue to measure progress by these budding partnerships. We owe it to students like Antonio and the families we serve.

Sincerely,

**Doug Tuthill**  
President, Step Up For Students

## Step Up For Students

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Senior Vice President, *U.S. Century Bank*



In 2001, the Florida Legislature passed an innovative scholarship program to level the educational playing field for Florida's families, making it possible for low-income parents to choose the K-12 school that is best for their child, whether it is a public or private school. This landmark program is the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program – also known as Step Up For Students. Through this program, the state has created an opportunity for corporations to partner with nonprofit organizations and low-income families in an effort to create a brighter future for Florida's children.

Step Up For Students Scholarships are funded by corporations that redirect up to 75 percent of their Florida corporate state income tax liability or insurance premium tax liability to a nonprofit scholarship funding organization (SFO) approved by the Department of Education. The SFO in turn redistributes the funds as K-12 education scholarships to students with limited financial resources. Participating corporations receive a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for all funds transferred to the SFO. Because corporations redirect funds they must already pay to the state, they are helping low-income children achieve greater academic excellence at no cost.

Only families that qualify for the National School Lunch Program are eligible for the scholarship program. Approved scholarship applicants receive up to \$3,950 per year to attend a K-12 school designated by their parent/caregiver. The scholarships cover up to \$3,950 for

private school tuition and books or up to \$500 in transportation costs to an out-of-district public school.

Step Up For Students is providing valuable educational options for Florida's low-income families, giving them the ability to choose the school that best meets their child's learning needs – an option that is already available to families of greater financial means. This program also benefits corporate donors, since corporations that participate receive a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for the amount they send to fund scholarships. Additionally, it is paving the way for an educated workforce that will greatly contribute to the betterment of our communities.

Since the launch of the scholarship program in 2002, Step Up For Students has made it possible for thousands of economically disadvantaged children to receive an education that will prepare them for a successful future. The program has gained recognition for its innovative approach to educational choice for families of limited means and now serves as a model for similar programs throughout the United States.

The growth of Step Up For Students is made possible by dedicated corporations, organizations, individuals, community leaders and families who believe in equipping all of Florida's children with educational options. To date, the corporate community has contributed more than \$550 million for Step Up For Students Scholarships – making it possible for more than 27,000 children to currently receive scholarships.

## Our History

**2001** — The Florida Legislature creates the Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship (CTC) Program to give new opportunities to low-income students in Kindergarten through 12th grade. The scholarship amount is set at \$3,500 per student, and the program is capped at \$50 million. House sponsor, Joe Negron, said upon passage, "This puts the parents in charge."

**2002** — The CTC program begins operation. The Collins Center projects that the increases in statewide net revenues could accumulate to more than \$600 million over the next 10 years as low-income students take advantage of this innovative choice program.

**2003** — Four CTC groups form the Florida Association of Scholarship Funding Organizations to impose strict financial and educational accountability controls. Florida TaxWatch projects the CTC program could save \$478 million over the next eight years.

**2005** — The Legislature raises the cap to \$88 million to meet growing demand.

**2006** — The Legislature, with the support of the Scholarship Funding Organizations, enacts a law establishing a list of

accountability measures, including the requirement that each student take a nationally recognized norm-referenced test. The scholarship amount is increased to \$3,750.

**2008** — The Legislature raises the program cap to \$118 million, increases the scholarship amount to \$3,950 and aims to reach 25,000 students. The law also authorizes 3 percent of the money to be used for administrative purposes. The Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA) announces that the scholarship program saved taxpayers \$38.9 million in 2007.

**2009** — The Legislature strengthens the program with a strong show of bipartisan support. The legislation extends tax credit status to insurance premium taxes. The program is renamed the Florida Tax Credit (FTC) Scholarship Program. A state-commissioned report looks at standardized test scores to conclude that scholarship students in 2007-08 kept pace academically with a public school comparison group and with students of all income levels nationally. Step Up For Students enters into partnership with Hillsborough district schools and the Hillsborough teachers union to provide professional training for teachers in private schools.

## Mission Statement

The mission of Step Up For Students is to improve Florida's K-12 educational system by creating and sustaining affordable educational options for low-income families and their children.

# SFOs (Scholarship Funding Organizations)



In 2009, we significantly strengthened our operational capacity. In July, our two largest scholarship funding organizations (Florida PRIDE and Children First Florida) merged to form the Step Up For Students scholarship funding organization (SFO). The Step Up For Students SFO now distributes more than 95 percent of the tax credit scholarships throughout Florida. This merger has allowed us to realize efficiencies and reduce costs while improving services for our families. The SFO merger has no direct effect on The Carrie Meek Foundation, which will continue to serve children in part of Miami-Dade County. Step Up For Students also assists the foundation with its application processing and fundraising. The two currently active SFOs – Step Up For Students and The Carrie Meek Foundation – are approved by the state Department of Education to oversee, manage and distribute scholarships, and are required to submit a detailed financial audit each year.

The SFOs work closely with parents/caregivers and participating schools to ensure that funds are disbursed appropriately. Additionally, the SFOs communicate regularly with the state Department of Education to ensure that student data, program accountability requirements and operational standards are communicated, understood and achieved.

In addition to the management of scholarship funds, the SFOs conduct a series of seminars for school administrators and parents that increase their understanding of school initiatives and programs, facilitate teacher/parent communication and supportive networks and develop safe educational and community alternatives for children. These activities integrate parents into their children's school, provide a local support network for struggling families and engage parents in work to improve their communities.

Beginning in March 2010, all parents will be encouraged to utilize an online application supplemented by paper documentation. This new procedure has been designed to simplify the application process. Most of the scholarship application processing is being housed in the Jacksonville office, which is also adding a call center in early 2010. We have also created a school development office to work directly with participating schools. The program's main web site, [www.stepupforstudents.org](http://www.stepupforstudents.org), has been expanded to serve as a portal for families and schools that can log in with a secure password to learn and provide information.



Only three cents of every FTC dollar contributed goes to cover the administrative operations of the scholarship funding organizations.



# Who We Serve

Thanks to the generous donors and supporters of the Step Up For Students program, as of December 31, 2009, more than 27,000 children in Florida are currently receiving scholarships – and the number is continually growing.

The scholarship program was created to help alleviate the enormous educational challenges faced by children who live in poverty. Scholarship recipients are often at-risk students who have a history of low academic and/or behavioral performance in their traditional public school setting. Because one school cannot meet the needs of every child, parents need choices for their children, especially when their children begin to have learning difficulties that their current school cannot solve. The scholarship gives parents with limited financial means the ability to choose a school with the academic environment that can address their child's individual learning needs.

Only families that qualify for the National School Lunch Program are eligible to receive scholarships. As a result, the average income of families accepted to receive scholarships in the 2008-09 school year was \$25,400 for a family of four, which is only 20 percent above the federal poverty line. The income threshold for free or reduced lunch in public schools is 185 percent of poverty. Additionally, about 60 percent of the scholarship children are from single-parent households.

The program serves all geographical areas of Florida, resulting in a diverse group of scholarship recipients. For example, statewide about 36 percent of the

scholarship children are African American, 24 percent are Caucasian and nearly 26 percent are Hispanic.

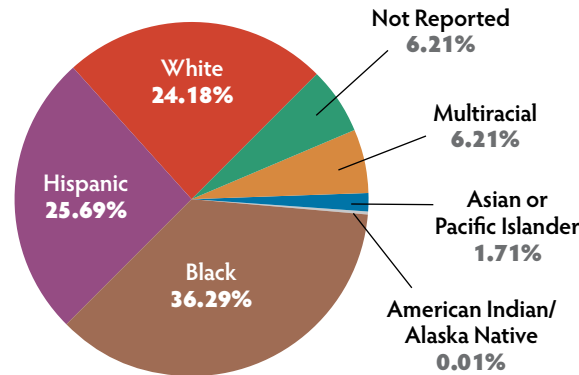
Parents with children on the scholarship program make significant sacrifices for their children to attend a school of choice. The maximum scholarship amount of \$3,950 usually does not cover the entire cost of tuition at participating schools. For example, during the 2008-09 school year, scholarship families paid an average of \$1,081 out of their own pockets to make up the difference between the scholarship and the full cost of tuition and books. Additionally, that does not include all the other school related expenses that parents must pay, such as any remaining fees, uniforms and transportation. These additional expenses are considerable when taken in context of the scholarship family's income level.

Despite the challenge of making ends meet to enroll their child in the school of their choice, scholarship parents tell us that their financial sacrifice is insignificant when compared to the differences they observe in their children's academic achievements and social performance after being placed in an academic environment right for them. Parents cite flexibility in teaching strategies, individual attention and correlation of family beliefs with the instructional environment as the reasons why they choose schools.

By providing low-income parents with more choices for their child's education, Step Up For Students is working to improve the educational outcomes of all of Florida's youth.

## Step Up For Students Scholarship Enrollment by Ethnicity

As of December 31, 2009



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# Our Donors



The success of Step Up For Students is fueled by the generosity and dedication of its donors. Since 2002, corporations in Florida and throughout the nation have demonstrated an immense commitment to education by providing more than \$550 million in scholarship funds for low-income children. Seeing the vast benefits of participating and the tremendous impact of their investment, corporations continue to enroll in the program each year.

Participating in the Step Up For Students program is a win-win opportunity for corporations. The scholarship program gives corporations the unique ability to provide educational options for thousands of children in Florida, while earning a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for their contributions. Corporations participate in the program by redirecting up to 75 percent of their Florida corporate income tax or insurance premium tax liability to a state-approved Scholarship Funding Organization (SFO) that provides K-12 education scholarships for low-income children. As a result, corporations participating in the program play an active role in the success of Florida's youth.

For banks there is an added benefit in participating in the program, as examiners at bank Community Reinvestment ACT (CRA) regulatory agencies have approved dollars transferred to fund scholarships through this program to qualify for positive consideration under the CRA investment test.

The corporate community has also helped to expand the scholarship program. When the scholarship program was passed in 2001, the initial legislation capped the annual tax credit donations at \$50 million. In 2005, the cap was raised to \$88 million to keep up with the growth and demand of the scholarship program. As a result of the success of the program, in 2008 the Florida Legislature raised the cap once again, this time by \$30 million to increase it to \$118 million.

Dedicated to the success of the program, several of the corporate donors have become actively involved in the program beyond providing scholarship funds. Many of the corporate donors also serve as sponsors of the Donor Appreciation Rallies and other events; provide administrative support; serve on the Step Up For Students Advisory Board; and even offer college scholarships to graduating scholarship recipients. Several of the corporations also promote the availability of scholarships to their employees, clients and customers, and even assist with introductions to prospective donors.

Step Up For Students has also formed strong partnerships with many foundations, individuals and other organizations to provide the administrative funds necessary to equip thousands of children with the educational tools for a promising future. This collaborative effort of corporations, foundations, individuals and other organizations make the success of the scholarship program possible.



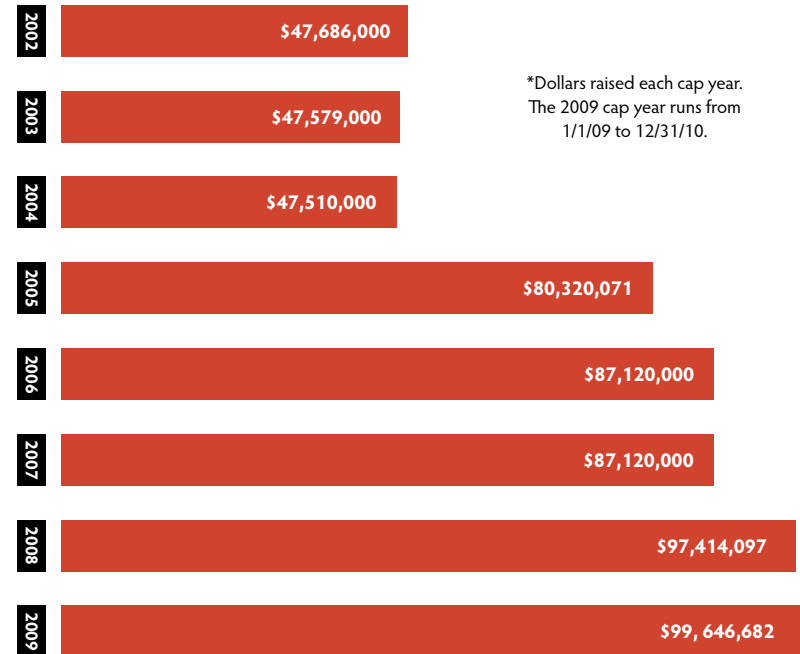
Step Up For Students gives corporations the unique ability to provide educational options for thousands of children in Florida, while earning a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for their contributions. Since 2002, corporations have contributed more than \$550 million to the scholarship program.



# Our Donors

| 2009 Representative Corporate Donors  |   | Foundation and Other Donors                          |
|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| ABC Liquors                           | Modern USA Insurance Company              | AAA National Office                                  |
| American Integrity Insurance Company  | Mosaic Fertilizer, LLC                    | BroadBased Communications, Inc.                      |
| American Strategic Insurance          | Nelnet                                    | Blue Ridge Foundation                                |
| American Traditions Insurance Company | Philip Morris USA                         | Delhaize America                                     |
| AT&T                                  | Phillips-Van Heusen Corporation           | Dick & Betsy DeVos Foundation                        |
| Bankers Insurance Group               | Preferred Care Partners                   | GEO Group  |
| BB&T Corporation                      | Progress Energy                           | Hickory Foundation                                   |
| BJ's Wholesale Club                   | PSS World Medical                         | Kaul Foundation                                      |
| Brown & Brown                         | Raymond James                             | Lavin Family Foundation                              |
| Burger King                           | Roche Surety & Casualty                   | Padget Fund/Community Foundation of the Florida Keys |
| Capitol Preferred                     | Rosen                                     | Richard & Helen DeVos Foundation                     |
| CenturyLink                           | Southern Fidelity                         | Walton Family Foundation                             |
| Citrus World                          | Southern Union Corp                       |  |
| CVS                                   | Star & Shield Insurance Exchange          |  |
| EverBank                              | Sunshine State Insurance Company          |  |
| FACTS Management Company              | Sysco Food Services Central Florida, Inc. |  |
| FCCI                                  | Sysco Food Services Jacksonville, Inc.    |  |
| Fidelity National Financial           | Sysco Food Services South Florida, Inc.   |  |
| Florida Family Insurance Company      | Sysco Food Services West Coast, Inc.      |  |
| Fresenius Medical Care North America  | The Jacksonville Bank                     |  |
| Gap Inc.                              | UnitedHealthcare                          |  |
| Gulf Power                            | Urban Outfitters                          |  |
| HCA                                   | V.F. Corporation                          |  |
| HMA                                   | Vector Group Ltd.'s                       |  |
| HSN                                   | Verizon Communications                    |  |
| LabCorp                               | Walgreen Co.                              |  |
| Landstar Systems, Inc.                | Waste Management                          |  |
| Lender Processing Services, Inc.      | WellCare Health Plans                     |  |
| Lowe's                                |   |  |
| Marriott International                |   |  |
| MEDNAX Services, Inc.                 |   |  |

## Corporate Contributions to the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program\*



\*Dollars raised each cap year. The 2009 cap year runs from 1/1/09 to 12/31/10.

Thanks to a very dedicated corporate community, since 2002 more than \$550 million has been raised to provide scholarships for economically disadvantaged children throughout the state of Florida.



# Donor Partnerships & Events



## Making Connections: Donor Partnerships and Special Events

Many of the Step Up For Students donors like to actively participate in the scholarship program beyond providing scholarship funds. Several donor companies have partnered with Step Up For Students through special events and other activities to promote the program and connect with the students they support. The following section is an overview of donor partnerships and special events from 2009.



### HCA and Coach Don Shula Promote Step Up For Students

Since first joining Step Up For Students in 2005, HCA Healthcare has remained a dedicated supporter of the scholarship program. In addition to contributing \$45,475,000 in scholarship funds for 12,175 students, HCA has greatly assisted in the promotion of the scholarship program. In the spring of 2009, HCA donated its staff, expertise and funds to produce and air commercials featuring famed NFL coach Don Shula and his wife Mary Anne endorsing the scholarship program. HCA also produced a second commercial that featured a Step Up For Students graduate who is studying to be a nurse. The commercials were instrumental in promoting Step Up For Students, helping to spread the word about the availability of scholarships and showcasing the impact the program is having on Florida's youth.

### AT&T Provides Youth with Cyber Safety Lessons

After first partnering with Step Up For Students in 2008 and seeing the incredible outcome of their contribution, corporate leaders at AT&T were eager to expand their participation in the scholarship program and reach out to the students they serve. So, in 2009 AT&T joined forces with Step Up For Students to educate children on cyber safety, a growing necessity in our technology driven society.

The first cyber safety educational event was in March 2009 at North Florida Christian School in Tallahassee, and featured Florida Attorney General Bill McCollum and Marshall Criser III, the President of AT&T Florida. A second event took place in October at Heritage Preparatory School in Orlando, and once again featured Mr. Criser and valuable Internet safety lessons using the reputable programs AT&T has developed. As an added bonus, the event also featured Otis Smith, the General Manager of the Orlando Magic, as a special guest speaker.

"It is truly admirable to see corporations like AT&T invest in our communities, both through their donations and sharing unique safety skills with our youth," Otis Smith said. "It is cru-



cial that all children have the access to a quality education, regardless of income. With the help of programs like Step Up For Students, we are collectively breaking the cycle of poverty."

Both events provided middle school children with valuable tips about how to keep their information – and themselves – safe when using the Internet.

To date, AT&T has contributed \$6.7 million to Step Up For Students, providing scholarships for more than 1,660 low-income children.



### Waste Management's Environmental Education Youth Day Camp

Waste Management, the leading provider of comprehensive waste management services in North America, is a strong supporter of Step Up For Students and has donated \$3 million to provide more than 774 scholarships since 2007. However, the team at Waste Management wanted to do more for the children it supports through the scholarship program. On August 27, 2009, Waste Management partnered with Step Up For Students for an Environmental Education Youth Day Camp, which provided an opportunity for the



# Donor Partnerships & Events

## U.S. Century Bank and Senate President "Toast Education"

On October 26, 2009, Senate President Jeff Atwater and more than 100 business leaders united in Miami to "Toast Education" and celebrate eight years of corporate support of the Step Up For Students Scholarship Program. The event, which was hosted by U.S. Century Bank, was dedicated to those supporters whose generosity and commitment have made it possible for thousands of Florida's low-income children to receive the educational foundation for success through the Step Up For Students program.

U.S. Century Bank first joined Step Up

For Students as a corporate donor in 2008 and has since redirected \$75,000 to the program. Established in 2002 and one of the ten largest community banks in South Florida, U.S. Century Bank has taken the lead in informing and encouraging local business leaders to support their community by supporting Step Up For Students.

Senate President Jeff Atwater, the keynote speaker for the "Toast Education" reception and long time supporter of the program, commended the corporate donors in attendance for their commitment and encouraged others to learn more about the program and get involved.

"The Tax Credit Scholarships are a catalyst for change—we need to broaden our choices for educational opportunities so we can effectively compete on an international scale," said Senate President Atwater. "Step Up For Students Scholarships are helping us to diversify our education system to achieve greater results and provide our children and future workforce with a world-class education."



## BJ's "Choose to Give" Holiday Food Drive

BJ's Wholesale Club joined Step Up For Students in 2009 with a \$500,000 donation that was celebrated on November 16, 2009, with a food drive at Tampa Bay Christian Academy. Representatives from BJ's joined elementary students as they presented more than 500



canned goods during the "Choose to Give" food drive. During the event, BJ's Wholesale Club unveiled \$1,000 worth of food that was also contributed to America's Second Harvest Food Bank of Tampa Bay.

With great excitement, roughly 40 students were joined by BJ's employees as well as State Representative Betty Reed for a hands-on activity as they bundled the canned goods into boxes that the students decorated as turkeys. The children presented the turkeys to the food bank representatives while singing Jimmy Buffett's "An Attitude of Gratitude"—a special song they rehearsed for the "Choose to Give" event.

Since BJ's opened its first club nearly 25 years ago, it has taken great pride in being a good corporate citizen. Its pride has been expressed in various community initiatives, including its support of Step Up For Students.

"BJ's Wholesale Club is committed to fighting hunger and bringing food to those 40,000 mouths that go hungry each day here in Tampa Bay," said Jessica Newman, manager of community relations for BJ's Wholesale Club. "We also have a long history of supporting education and are honored to be a part of a program that is changing the lives of so many children in Florida."

Waste Management team to connect with the scholarship children through a day full of activities that encouraged students to "think green."

During the event, elementary students from The Potter's House Christian Academy in Jacksonville, took a field trip to the Trail Ridge Landfill west of Jacksonville, where Waste Management representatives spent the afternoon turning the facility into an environmental classroom. Students learned how they can protect the environment in their everyday lives and discovered some eye-opening energy facts. The children also took a tour of

the landfill and even built their own edible landfills.

Prior to the field trip, a distinguished group of guests attended a reception to celebrate the Step Up For Students program and thank Waste Management for its outstanding support. The reception included inspiring personal testimony by Denisha Merriweather, a 12th-grader at Esprit de Corps Center for Learning in Jacksonville who overcame a series of significant challenges in her life and in her academics thanks to the scholarship program. The morning reception also included former state representative Terry L. Fields, retired Jacksonville Sheriff Nathaniel

"Nat" Glover Jr., and former Jacksonville Mayor Jake Godbold. Nat Glover, who himself has donated hundreds of thousands of his own money to benefit the education of low-income children in Jacksonville, lauded the work Waste Management has done for students.

"In the long run, the return on your investment is obvious," Glover told the Waste Management team and guests at the reception. "If we don't educate them, we will have to support them in their adult lives. That's why the investment up front is so important."

# Donor Appreciation Rally



## Thanking Our Partners: 2009 Donor Appreciation Rally

On October 16, 2009, more than 800 students, parents, educators, corporate representatives, legislators and other Step Up For Students supporters were joined by Governor Charlie Crist for the “Leveling the Playing Field” Rally at Mount Bethel Christian Academy in Fort Lauderdale. The Sixth Annual Donor Appreciation Rally, sponsored by Walgreen Co., celebrated the generous donations on behalf of corporations, foundations and private donors that are collectively providing scholarships for more than 27,000 low-income students in Florida.

Offering a true testament to the Step Up For Students Scholarship Program and the impact of the generous donors, Antonio Trigo took the stage and revealed his previous struggles and how this scholarship has provided renewed hope for the future. Just a few years ago, the scholarship allowed Antonio to enroll at Mt. Olivet Seventh-Day Adventist School in Fort Lauderdale, where he earned a spot on the honor roll and learned to play piano by the eighth grade. Last spring, he addressed his classmates as their valedictorian.

Now a freshman at Miami Union Academy, Antonio thanked the donors whose contributions made the scholarship possible. “You have given me a second chance at success,” Antonio said.

Governor Crist responded by celebrating a scholarship that gives families, like Antonio’s, choices when they would otherwise have none.

“I am grateful to all the companies who have taken the time to learn about this

valuable program and participate in it,” said Governor Crist. “With their generous support, Florida’s children have more scholarship opportunities available and together, I am confident we will continue to provide more educational opportunities and options here in Florida.”

The Step Up For Students Scholarship Program thrives thanks to the contributions of its donors. Step Up For Students took the annual opportunity on October 16th to thank its supporters, which include the Walgreen Co., BB&T and LabCorp. All three corporations took center stage and each presented a check to the Governor for Step Up For Students Scholarships.

Since 2006, Walgreens has contributed \$26 million to provide scholarships for at least 6,500 low-income children. Additionally, BB&T announced its \$2 million contribution to Step Up For Students, which awards scholarships to 491 students. LabCorp also said it is contributing \$2.25 million to provide 560 scholarships.

Event attendees were also joined by Rev. H.K. Matthews, a civil rights icon who marched with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma, Ala., and fought for equality throughout Florida. Matthews spoke of empowering parents trapped by finances to find the right school for their children.

The 2009 rally was successful in bringing together corporations, students, parents, teachers and elected officials – demonstrating how partnering with Step Up For Students greatly contributes to the success of our children and communities.



Every Fall, Step Up For Students organizes a Donor Appreciation Rally to publicly thank our corporate donors and supporters for their contributions and to highlight the achievements of the scholarship recipients. The event unites the Step Up For Students partners – corporations, students, parents, teachers, schools and community leaders – and gives corporate and community representatives the opportunity to interact with the students they support through the scholarship program.





**Step Up For Students is committed to providing effective and accessible educational options to low-income students. To protect that goal, a range of monitoring and assessment methods have been implemented, including:**

**Flexibility:** Scholarships are awarded to students, not schools, making them portable. If an educational institution fails to meet the needs of a student or the expectations of a parent, they are free to choose another institution.

**Testing:** Each scholarship recipient is required to annually take a nationally recognized norm-referenced test. Additionally, studies are now being conducted to compare the academic gains of the Step Up For Students children to a comparable group of public school students. The first academic report, released in June 2009 by the Florida Department of Education, concluded that the program is attracting some of the state's lowest-performing and poorest children from public schools, and that they are keeping pace with both a state public school comparison group and all students nationally.

**Fiscal Accountability:** The Scholarship Funding Organizations (SFOs) require proof of income from all applicants each year to ensure they meet established income standards, as well as other documentation to confirm all applicants meet the guidelines of the scholarship program. Additionally, an independent auditor audits each SFO annually and submits the results to the State of Florida for review.

**Tax Savings:** Independent studies conducted by three highly respected organizations and research groups have concluded that the scholarship program provides valuable tax savings for the state. These findings include:

➔ **The Collins Center for Public Policy:** In 2002, The Collins Center for Public Policy concluded that the scholarship program would result in a \$600 million increase in statewide net revenue available for education over the next 10 years. In 2007, the Collins Center reported that the initiative had already saved the state nearly \$140 million during fiscal years 2002-04. The report also determined that General Fund Revenue for K-12 public education did not decrease as a result of the scholarship program, but actually increased by \$2.1 billion during this same period.

➔ **Florida TaxWatch:** In 2003, Florida TaxWatch forecast a savings of \$25.6 million for 2003-04 and said the program would help alleviate the state's financial burden in reducing public-school classroom sizes. Florida TaxWatch also concluded that the program could save \$478 million over the next eight years.

➔ **OPPAGA:** In December 2008, the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA) declared that the scholarship program saved taxpayers \$38.9 million in 2007. The reason for the savings is that the students receive scholarships to state approved private schools that cost less than the amount the state would spend on the student in a public school. In 2007-08, according to OPPAGA, the average scholarship cost was \$3,412 as compared to a state cost of \$6,106 in public schools. The report estimated that at least 90 percent of the students currently on the scholarship program would otherwise attend public schools. The result, according to OPPAGA, is that for each \$1 redirected through corporate tax credits, the state saves \$1.49 in general revenue.

## Step Up For Students Brings Parental Satisfaction

**In August 2009, The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice released a first-ever parental satisfaction survey of parents on the Step Up For Students Scholarship Program, and the numbers are overwhelming. Roughly, 80 percent of parents said they were "very satisfied" with the academic progress and the individual attention their children were experiencing in their private schools. Additionally, 76 percent reported that they were "very satisfied" with the quality of teachers and the way the schools respond to their needs.**

**The findings come from a telephone survey of participating parents whose children attended public schools before entering the program. Robert Enlow, President and CEO of the Indianapolis-based Friedman Foundation, was impressed. "In this first ever empirical evaluation of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program, we have found remarkably higher levels of parental and family satisfaction with the private schools their children attend," Enlow said. "The opinions of the parents are clear: they appreciate the opportunities given their children under this program, and they appreciate the options that the program gives them. ... Here's a takeaway from this study: give parents more options and you will see increased levels of satisfaction with the educational enterprise."**



# 2009 Legislation Overview

During the spring of 2009, the Florida legislature voted to strengthen the Step Up For Students Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program, sending a bill to the governor that had strong bipartisan support in both chambers, including nearly half of the Democrats, as well as a majority of the Black Caucus and all of the Hispanic Caucus. The bill, HB 453, allows insurance companies to now receive a credit against their insurance premium taxes for contributions to the program and also streamlines applications for low-income families.

“It’s so gratifying to see how far we have come politically,” said John Kirtley, chairman and founder of Step Up For Students. “The more that people know about our program the more they can see that we’re a partner with public schools, that our goal is to help public education fulfill the promise of equal opportunity.”

The bill, sponsored by Rep. Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, and Sen. Andy Gardiner, R-Orlando, passed the two chambers in late April by a combined margin of 123-34. It made three key changes to existing law:

- 1) The dollar-for-dollar tax credit on corporate income taxes was extended to include insurance premium taxes, providing another avenue for companies to contribute to the scholarship program;
- 2) Families who have been certified for state income-based programs, such as food stamps and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, will no longer need to recertify their income when applying to receive a Step Up For Students Scholarship;
- 3) School districts, when requested by a scholarship organization,

are required to help notify low-income parents of the program’s existence.

The legislative effort received a boost from roughly 200 parents and educators who visited the Capitol one week prior to the House vote. The supporters came from throughout the state, some of them boarding buses before midnight to make their legislative appointments the following day. They wore special T-shirts and met with lawmakers and walked the halls of the Senate and House office buildings. Over the course of two days, they participated in more than 70 different legislative meetings.

“When legislators can hear firsthand how the scholarships help students,” said Step Up For Students President Doug Tuthill, “it makes a tremendous difference.”

The bill motivated many to speak on its behalf. Rep. Darryl Rouson, a Democrat from St. Petersburg, was among the lawmakers who rose to speak.

Rouson told his colleagues: “In these days of technology and access and educational advancements, we need to give families choice. And young children, whether they’re black or Hispanic or Asian, ought to have access to the same kind of private privileged education that some of our other children have just because of who their parents are. What this bill does is that it gives the mom and the other members of the family and the children a different kind of a chance. If you’re failing in school, it gives you a chance to maybe find another location and to get started.”



Hundreds of scholarship supporters traveled to Tallahassee from throughout the state for the opportunity to voice their great experience with and need for the Step Up For Students Scholarship Program.

## Innovative Partnerships

Given that school quality is imperative for high student achievement, Step Up For Students created a new initiative in 2009 called the Office of School Development. The mission of the Office of School Development is to support the continual improvement of schools serving low-income students and their families. This new entity will work with private school administrators to ensure that they meet the compliance rules set forth by the Florida Department of Education, assist them in accessing Federal funds (Title I, Title II, IDEA), and help with creating a Free & Re-

duced Meals Program for their students.

The Office of School Development is also helping schools create and implement school improvement plans to grow their capability to serve an expanded number of students. Lastly, our private school teachers will have access to an innovative online professional development program that will allow them to increase their pedagogical knowledge and skills while helping them maintain their state teaching certificates.

To help us develop and deliver these online courses, Step Up

For Students has partnered with the Hillsborough Teachers Union, the Hillsborough County school district and the Center for Technology and Education. This historic partnership has also provided other opportunities to collaborate with the Hillsborough County school district. Step Up For Students chairman, John Kirtley, has joined the prestigious Hillsborough Education Foundation, which serves students and teachers in the Hillsborough County school district. In his new role, Mr. Kirtley will work with foundation members to improve the education outcomes for all low-income students in Hillsborough County.

# Student Spotlights



Each year, Step Up For Students provides thousands of children with the opportunity to attend a school that can best meet their learning needs so that they can work towards a promising future. By enabling parents to choose the school that can provide the right academic setting for their child, Step Up For Students is helping to improve the educational outcomes of all of Florida's children.

Scholarship parents constantly report on the positive changes their children experience after receiving a scholarship. These families are excited to share the tremendous impact the program has had on their lives and eager to show their appreciation to the donors and supporters who make it all possible. The following section is a compilation of the personal stories of students and parents who represent just a few of the thousands of scholarship families Step Up For Students serves.

## Jasmine Salter / North Florida Christian School, Tallahassee

Once consumed by worry and frustration, eleventh-grader Jasmine Salter has blossomed academically at North Florida Christian School in Tallahassee, with a hunger to succeed and continue on to higher education.

Before attending North Florida Christian, Jasmine was an average student at her neighborhood public school who was forced to confront a heavy burden at home. Her mother, Helen, was diagnosed with Lupus, and her health began to decline. Jasmine's worries about her mom affected her performance in school, especially in math.

As the years passed, Jasmine's frustrations grew. Her mother could see where that was leading, and decided that Jasmine needed a new school that would help meet her unique and growing challenges. Helen, a single mother on a fixed income, was determined to find an environment that would help her daughter to achieve her full potential.

Then, a relative told her about the Step Up For Students Scholarship for students from low-income families. The opportunity allowed a once hopeless mother to find a school where Jasmine could turn her academic record around. It also allowed Helen to shake free from the worries about her daughter's education – a frustration she faced while undergoing a kidney transplant.

Currently in her seventh year on the scholarship program, Jasmine has thrived academically thanks to the genuine dedication of teachers who have helped her overcome her challenges. When Jasmine enrolled at Tallavana Christian School for fifth grade, she was able to receive one-on-one assistance and her grades improved dramatically. During her second semester of fifth grade, she was on the A-B honor roll.

The success motivated Jasmine and pushed her to continue to excel. By the time she reached her high school years, she was already thinking about college. At that time, she heard about North Florida Christian's outstanding college prep programs. She also found out that the Step Up For Students Scholarship is portable, because it is awarded to the student and not the school. Jasmine was able to transfer to North Florida Christian, where she continues to succeed



Seeing Jasmine's frustration with school, her mother, Helen, was determined to find the best academic environment that would help her daughter succeed. Now in the 11th grade, Jasmine maintains a 3.0 GPA and is planning on attending college to pursue a career in education.

and dream about the future.

Jasmine currently maintains a 3.0 grade point average and is planning on attending college upon graduation to pursue a career in education. She is already gaining valuable experience to assist with her future goals by working at the afterschool care program for preschool children at North Florida Christian. She dreams of being the inspirational hand that will touch other struggling students, like herself just years ago, realize their full potential.

### About North Florida Christian School

Located in Tallahassee, North Florida Christian School is a private school with college preparatory curriculum for students in PK - 12th grade. The school currently serves 825 children, 90 of whom are Step Up For Students scholarship recipients. The school annually administers the Stanford Achievement Test 10. The annual tuition for grades K-12 ranges from \$5,047 for elementary school up to \$6,309 for high school, and varies depending on grade level and program.



# Student Spotlights



## Maegan & Mitchell Anderson / 2009 Graduates of Trinity Christian Academy, Deltona

Maegan Anderson is three minutes older and graduated only about one-hundredth of a point higher than her brother Mitchell, but age and grade point average are not their only similarities. In June 2009, five years after they first began receiving a Step Up For Students Scholarship, the twins received their high school diplomas from Trinity Christian Academy in Deltona, an accomplishment that only begins to explain their achievement.

Maegan and Mitchell, with GPAs of 4.25 and 4.19 respectively, graduated from high school just two credits shy of also earning an associate's degree in college. Maegan was valedictorian and Mitchell placed third in their graduating class.

Their academic feat owes in part to the dual enrollment agreement between Trinity and Daytona State College. They were allowed to take community college courses beginning in their sophomore year and fell short of earning the AA degree prior to graduation only because the science course schedule conflicted with their church commitments.

In fact, the twins never seem to take a break. During their high school years, both played multiple varsity sports and were also involved in church, with Maegan singing in the choir and Mitchell traveling on goodwill missions to places like Nassau. Both also helped at a local day care center.

Following graduation, Maegan jumped right back into pursuing higher education and began attending the University of Central Florida (UCF) over the summer. Now a junior at UCF, Maegan is majoring in mathematical education with only a year and a half left until she receives her bachelor's degree. It is no surprise that she is currently making straight A's in her college courses.

Mitchell, also a junior at UCF, has continued to ex-

cel in college as well. Prior to transferring to UCF for the spring 2010 semester, Mitchell attended Jacksonville State University in Alabama, where he maintained a 4.0 GPA and was on the football team. Now at UCF, he plans to pursue a degree in the field of natural engineering.

Gregory and Elke Anderson are very proud of their children's accomplishments. Neither parent graduated from college, so it has been a dream come true to see their children obtain a college education. They believe the scholarship program made it possible for their children to excel in school and in life.

"Step Up For Students has given my children countless opportunities," says Elke Anderson. "Through this program, my husband and I were able to choose the school best for our children, and, as a result, they have been able to truly reach their full potential. I am proud of my children for the outstanding individuals they have become and thankful to those who make this program possible."

Mr. and Mrs. Anderson decided five years ago that their twins needed a different place to learn. They felt the public school they attended was not the right fit for them, and that their academics could suffer without a more nurturing environment. As the parents of four children living on a fixed income, it was not possible to afford private school tuition. However, with the help from Step Up For Students, their children have been able to excel at a school suited to their individual learning needs.

Trinity was a perfect fit for the Anderson children, with a total K-12 enrollment of about 450 students and an expansive program that includes dual enrollment and a full array of extracurricular activities. The Andersons also like that the teachers always make themselves available to students, even after school is out.



In the summer of 2009 both Maegan and Mitchell graduated high school just two credits shy of earning a college associates degree. Both have continued on their path of success while attending the University of Central Florida.

### About Trinity Christian Academy

Trinity Christian Academy in Deltona, is an interdenominational school opened in 1986. It currently serves about 450 students in grades K-12, of whom 144 are on a Step Up For Students Scholarship. The tuition and fees amount for the 2009/10 school year is \$5,125 for elementary and \$5,525 for middle and high school. The school administers the Stanford-10 Achievement Test.



## Antonio Trigo / Miami Union Academy, North Miami

During the spring of 2009, as valedictorian of his eighth grade class, Antonio Trigo gave a moving speech and even played a solo piece on the piano for his school's graduation ceremony. However, a few years ago, Antonio was going nowhere in school. A Step Up For Students Scholarship provided him with the opportunity to attend a school that could meet his learning needs and he has excelled.

Life has not always been easy for Antonio and his family. When he was five years old, his grandmother, Patricia Allen, gained legal custody of Antonio and his siblings when his biological mother was no longer able to care for them. Patricia, who is now raising five of her grandchildren, works hard to make sure that they have everything that they need, including the proper education. That is why she was concerned when Antonio began to struggle in his public school classes.

Antonio's grades had dropped to C's and D's and he was having a hard time concentrating during class. He also began to get into physical fights with other students during school. Patricia was worried that his motivation would continue to dwindle along with his grades. She feared for his well-being and, ultimately, his future. She knew from her experience with Antonio's mother about the downfalls that were ahead if Antonio did not get back on the right path. She had to do something to save him.

As a struggling parent on a fixed income, Patricia felt that her options were very limited -- until she learned about the Step Up For Students Scholarship. Patricia applied and received a scholarship for Antonio, as well as for two of his younger brothers. She chose to send them to Mt. Olivet Seventh-Day Adventist School in Fort Lauderdale because she felt that it offered the right academic environment that her children desperately needed.

Antonio began to attend Mt. Olivet in seventh grade. The school was a perfect fit for him. The teachers at Mt. Olivet saw the potential Antonio had and worked with him to overcome his struggles. Raquel Ferguson, an associate of the school, also took a special interest in Antonio and his siblings. Referred to as "Ms. Raquel" by the children, she helped Antonio with schoolwork, helped to pay for his field trips, and

even provided the family with donations including clothing and school supplies.

With the help from the Mt. Olivet staff and Ms. Raquel, Antonio regained his enthusiasm for learning and his grades soared. By the time he reached eighth grade, he was an honor roll student and had learned how to play the piano. He was even scoring two grade levels ahead on the standardized test administered at the school – the Iowa Test of Basic Skills.

Now in the ninth grade, Antonio is attending Miami Union Academy on the scholarship program and he is continuing to shine. Although he is a few years away from high school graduation, he has already begun to think about his future. He plans to attend college and pursue a degree in pathology.

Antonio's brothers have also excelled since receiving their Step Up For Students Scholarships. For example, Antonio's younger brother Mauricio Trigo has made leaps and bounds in his education. When Mauricio was preparing to enter kindergarten several years ago, he was testing at the top level for his age group and the test administrator commented that he would be the next president of the United States. However, upon entering kindergarten, he had five teachers throughout the school year and his academic performance began to decline due to the confusion and constant changes. He failed and had to repeat kindergarten. He continued to struggle in school until he received the Step Up For Students Scholarship to attend Mt. Olivet. He was able to get back on track and is now excelling in the sixth grade.

Antonio's youngest brother Terriano Trigo has also benefited from the scholarship program. A Step Up For Students recipient since kindergarten, Terriano is now in the first grade and he is doing exceptionally well in school, including earning a spot on the honor roll.

"I cannot thank Step Up For Students and its donors enough," says Patricia Allen, Antonio's grandmother and legal guardian. "Without these scholarships, there is no telling what would have happened to my boys. The scholarship program gave my children the second chances they needed for success in school and in life."



In the spring of 2009 Antonio graduated as valedictorian of his eighth grade class and later shared his inspiring story during the Fall Step Up For Students Donor Appreciation Rally.

### About Mt. Olivet Seventh-Day Adventist School

Located in Fort Lauderdale, Mt. Olivet Seventh-Day Adventist School serves students in kindergarten through eighth grade. Currently, 65 students are enrolled at the school, including 19 Step Up For Students scholarship recipients. The school administers the Iowa Test of Basic Skills twice a year – in the fall and again in the spring – to assess student progress and abilities. The standard tuition at the school is \$3,350 for all grade levels.

### About Miami Union Academy

Located in North Miami, Miami Union Academy serves children from early childhood education through 12th grade. The school currently has over 300 students, about 160 of whom are Step Up For Students scholarship recipients. The school's annual tuition rates range from \$4,710 for kindergarten up to \$6,993 for 12th grade. Miami Union administers the following standardized achievement tests: IOWA Test of Basic Skills, ACT, PSAT, Plan and Explorer.

# Parent Spotlight



## Maria Quinones-Garcia / Lakeland

Ten years ago, Maria Quinones-Garcia was determined to remove her five grandchildren from their broken home and dedicate her life to their upbringing. She left her warehouse job in Reading, Penn., and made the leap of faith to Lakeland, where she hoped the children would thrive in a new environment.

Silas Lopez and Shayla Williams were among her charges, but things weren't going well for them in their new school career. Both were enrolled at a local public middle school in Lakeland, and neither excelled academically. Lacking a father figure, Silas was at times defiant and lax in his studies. Shayla, shy and anxious in such a large school where fights frequently broke out around her, often told her grandmother that she was sick and needed to stay home.

The change upon which their grandmother would insist two years ago has also been a turning point in their lives. Silas and Shayla are now students at Victory Christian Academy in Lakeland through a Step Up For Students Scholarship, and they say they couldn't be more pleased.

The turnaround has been dramatic. Silas, now 16, found the school small when he first arrived, but its size has brought out his leadership potential and inspired him to volunteer his time to school causes, his teachers and coaches say. He wound up on the football team and raised his grade-point average to a 3.1. Shayla,

now 13, climbed out of her shell and eventually tried out for the volleyball team. She's now earning As and Bs. Just as importantly, school administrators say, she's smiling more.

Of her new school, Shayla said, "there's no drama. No one fights here." Silas says he now looks forward to school. "You want to come. You expect to laugh," he said.

They even have career goals: Shayla hopes to become a pediatrician; Silas, a doctor or a teacher.

Shayla and Silas aren't the only two grandchildren to benefit from Step Up For Students. Quinones-Garcia already has sent one grandson on to college after attending Evangel Christian School in Lakeland. That grandson's success and his emerging role as a father figure for Silas persuaded Quinones-Garcia to pursue the same option again.

For Quinones-Garcia, raising grandchildren by herself has not been easy. But she offers no complaints. In fact, she continues to reach out to help others in her community. She now works as a hospital chaplain and spends her time ministering to jail inmates in Polk County.

"I knew it was going to be rough," Quinones-Garcia said of her decision 10 years ago. But she tells her grandchildren today, "When you go out to do something, sometimes you have to struggle. Not everyone has the luxury of being from a rich family."



Eager to have a solution for her grandchildren, Maria applied for and received a scholarship for both Silas and Shayla. She chose to send them to Victory Christian Academy, a school she felt could help them succeed academically and thrive socially. Today, both students are doing well and are planning for their future career goals.

### About Victory Christian Academy

Victory Christian Academy opened in 1998 to first-grade students and now enrolls 400 students in grades Prek-12, 62 of whom are on the Step Up For Students Scholarship. Located at 1401 Griffin Road in Lakeland, the school boasts a curriculum that is "traditional in content, but innovative in approach." It emphasizes reading, critical thinking, character development and learning labs while introducing advanced concepts during group and hands-on activities. The school also administers the Stanford Achievement Test. Out of 23 high school seniors last year, 20 went on to college. The annual tuition is \$5,280 for grades K-5 and \$5,530 for grades 6-12.



# School Spotlights



To ensure that each scholarship student has the opportunity to attend a school that meets his or her individual learning needs, Step Up For Students has partnered with more than 1,000 K-12 private schools that are approved by the Florida Department of Education to participate in the scholarship program. Many of these schools are in the low-income areas of major cities and were designed to address educational issues children were facing in their traditional public school settings. These schools serve as a catalyst for neighborhood revitalization and provide the educational foundation for students to build promising futures.

Many of the schools participating in the scholarship program are an innovative breed of private school with a lower tuition rate and a more urban location than other private schools. For example, for the 2009/10 school year, the average annual tuition rate and fees of participating private schools statewide is \$6,355.

In addition to working with the SFOs on processing paperwork and tuition checks for the scholarship students, schools participating in the Step Up For Students program must also adhere to a high standard of accountability. These schools must comply with the scholarship program laws and guidelines, which include conducting background checks and fingerprinting on all school employees, and administering or making provisions for scholarship students to take a nationally recognized norm-referenced test and report the students' scores to the parents and an independent private research organization selected by the Florida Department of Education.

The following school spotlights are just a few of the schools that are working with Step Up For Students to improve our communities and increase the educational outcomes of Florida's children.

## St. Andrew Catholic School | Orlando

Dr. Kathleen Kiley doesn't hide her enthusiasm when she shows off her latest school literature. "Your child deserves to attend a Nationally Recognized Blue Ribbon School of Excellence," reads one postcard for prospective parents.

The St. Andrew Catholic School leader isn't simply boasting. In 2009, the Orlando school was one of only 12 public and private schools in Florida that the U.S. Department of Education named Blue Ribbon Schools.

The Blue Ribbon Schools Program honors elementary, middle and high schools that are either academically superior or that show

dramatic gains in achievement among disadvantaged students. For Kiley, the distinction is especially sweet. While she helped bring a more affluent school to Blue Ribbon excellence about two years ago, St. Andrew enrolls some of the most economically disadvantaged students in a diocese that covers nine counties.

Founded in 1961, the school has gradually evolved into an institution that reaches out to at-risk youth from the surrounding Pine Hills neighborhood, which itself has seen an increase in greater poverty. It is a mission that Kiley and her staff take seriously. Despite the



In 2009, St. Andrew Catholic School was one of only 12 public and private schools in Florida that the U.S. Department of Education named Blue Ribbon Schools. The school currently serves 345 students, 130 of whom are receiving Step Up For Students Scholarships.



financial challenges facing all Catholic schools these days, St. Andrew recognized a need to fulfill a vital role in the community.

The principal herself roams the corridors and peeks inside classrooms, saying hello to students and asking how they're doing. The school counselor is a visible presence as well and knows just who needs the extra attention because of issues outside of school. To some students, the counselor is one of the reasons they look forward to school.

St. Andrew has one of the most diverse enrollments of any school that participates in Step Up For Students. White, black and Hispanic students each make up about one-quarter of the enrollment. Of the 345 students who attend the school, about 130 receive the Step Up For Students Scholarship. St. Andrew uses the Iowa Test of Basic Skills to gauge the progress of its students, and its average tuition and fees are about \$5,800.

If it wasn't for the scholarship, Kiley said, "there's no way [the neighborhood kids] could afford to go here. Now, they can go to a nationally recognized school."

One of those students is Darius Cook, a sixth-grader who recently told his mother that for the first time in his life, college is in his future. He plays soccer, basketball and track. He's in the Spanish Club, the Accelerated Reader program, art, music and chorus. He loves reading and anime drawing. He has a tutor who helps him with math, a Monday-Wednesday-Friday lunch club with a school counselor who helps him keep on task with his studies and homework.

"He has a whole new attitude," said his mother, Amy Cook. "What I see is that he is constantly setting new goals for himself."

Asked about her formula for Blue Ribbon excellence, Kiley said it's no mystery: the faculty is committed; the parents are committed; and the expectations are high.

"I inherited a good staff," Kiley says. "Our teachers hold students to a high standard."

## Aukela Christian Military Academy | Hollywood

About 20 years ago, Audrey B. Rodriguez was concerned about her son's academic future. He had minimal learning disabilities and was beginning to have some behavioral problems in school. In her search for a school that could help her son, she discovered that many other parents were also in need of an alternative educational environment to address their children's learning needs. Her need to help her own son spurred into a desire to help families in similar situations. In September 1990, Ms. Rodriguez founded Aukela Christian Military Academy, a unique educational institution that serves students in grades pre-school through 12th grade.

Aukela began on the third floor of The Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Miami with 75 students. However, after Hurricane Andrew hit in the early 1990s and destroyed the building, the school was forced to relocate to Broward County. Now located in Hollywood, Aukela serves 115 students, 30 of which are Step Up For Students scholarship recipients.

Aukela's innovative approach includes assessing its students individually to design an academic plan that is tailored for each child's needs and abilities. Upon enrolling in the school, each student is given an assessment test to determine academic ability. Assessment tests are also given throughout the year to measure student progress and determine if any modifications are needed for any student's individual academic plan. The school also annually administers the Basic Achievement Skills Inventory (BASI) test, form A and B.

Aukela's distinctive academic programs have helped students at the school overcome significant academic challenges.

"We have had numerous children enter our school who are struggling academically – sometimes even three to five grade levels behind," says Audrey Rodriguez. "We give them the opportunity to wipe their slate clean and start over, regardless of what academic or behavioral issues they had in the past. Our programs are designed to give students the boost they need to believe in themselves once again and achieve."

The school's military influence is designed to instill students with courtesy, respect, structure and discipline using old school values. All students are required to wear a military-style uniform.

Aukela's highly acclaimed Honor Guard is also noteworthy. The team travels around the state to perform their military style flag presentations. Aukela's Honor Guard has performed at NBA basketball games, the Walt Disney World Veterans Parade, the Governors Conference and numerous other events throughout the state. The Honor Guard team is comprised of the academy's finest students in sixth through 12th grade, both males and females.

Over the past few years, Aukela has also worked to cut costs and adjust the tuition to make it more affordable for families. Annual tuition costs at the school range from \$4,500 to \$7,500, not including uniforms, books and other fees.

Serving students in grades pre-school through 12th, Aukela Christian Military Academy assesses its students individually to design an academic plan that is tailored for each child's needs and abilities. Aukela's distinctive academic programs have helped students at the school overcome significant academic challenges.





## Classical Christian School for the Arts / Pinellas Park

Dan and Sylvia Baker are the founders of Classical Christian School for the Arts (CCSA) in Pinellas Park – an innovative school that is providing opportunities for academic mastery, growth, citizenship, athleticism and artistic discovery to the children of West Central Florida. The school has successfully blended classical education with cultural influences in an effort to provide children with a well-rounded foundation.

The Bakers had a longtime dream of starting a school that could apply the very best of what they had learned during their more than 20 years of experience in private education. Unfortunately, Sylvia had to overcome some battles of her own before she and her husband could fulfill their dream. In 2001, Sylvia was diagnosed with cancer. After treatments, she wrote a book and workbook and did some touring and speaking engagements for the next couple of years while continuing to work as a vice principal at another private school in Maryland. However, the Bakers' desire to start a school did not fade over the years and a sense of urgency toward accomplishing their dream of CCSA began to develop.

In 2005, equipped with a passion for education and the arts, and a small inheritance, the Bakers opened the doors to CCSA. The school started with an enrollment of only 30 students and has steadily increased over the years. Today, the school serves 80 students, 19 of whom are Step Up For Students scholarship recipients.

CCSA has created a way to provide a full educational experience in one setting for today's busy families.

"Today both parents work, many children come from single family homes, and yet no parent wants their child to be short-changed at the end of the day," says Sylvia Baker. "At Classical Christian School for the Arts, parents have the opportunity for a 'one stop shop', so that their precious time together in the evenings is not spent going back out for enrichment activities."

CCSA is unique for several reasons, the most apparent of which is the daily requirement of two periods of arts programming. Students select from 30 to 40 arts classes in dance, drama, visual art, and music – including classes like traditional and folk art, ballet, tap, lyrical dance, band, voice, instrumental and improvisation. Students at the school also receive a lot of hands-on



Classical Christian School for the Arts has created a way to provide a full educational experience in one setting for today's busy families. The school has successfully blended classical education with cultural influences in an effort to provide children with a well-rounded foundation.

attention since the class sizes at CCSA are on average about one teacher per 12 students.

Additionally, CCSA has established a unique math and reading program to prevent students from falling behind in their academics. If students begin to struggle with specific skills in their classes, they are automatically moved to an enrichment group to help them master the skill at hand. The school also annually administers the Stanford Achievement Test – Tenth Edition (SAT-10) to assess student progress and abilities.

The Bakers have also worked to accommodate the budgets of the families while still providing students with a quality educational experience. Sylvia does not take a salary and Dan only has a minimal salary. The base tuition at the school is \$5,800, plus additional fees for registration and activity costs.

In addition to the range of art programs it offers students,

CCSA sponsors the Community Visual and Performing Arts Series annually, which includes six to eight shows featuring student performances in dance and music, as well as art displays. All performances are at the Pinellas Park Performing Arts Center on the CCSA campus. The shows are well attended by the community, sometimes filling the house to capacity with 600 guests.

The Bakers have successfully fulfilled their dream with CCSA over the past five years, but they are eager to do more. Their future plans include building a children's art museum within the school that will memorialize the children's art work for years to come. They are also looking into incorporating a dual enrollment program for students to earn college credit while attending CCSA. Additionally, they would like to use their expertise to help other schools develop a similar model to redesign their programs or start a new school.





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