



## SPREADING THE NEWS

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# Gov. - elect Rick Scott joins hundreds at rally for Florida Tax Credit Scholarship

ST. PETERSBURG — A student's first step on the path to a good education begins with giving parents the power to choose the best learning environment for their child.

That's the message Gov.- elect Rick Scott delivered to an audience today at Suncoast Cathedral in St. Petersburg. Scott spoke to hundreds at the annual celebration of Step Up For Students and the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship.

About 900 students from 27 schools attended the event.

No matter their background, parents – and their children – should have options when it comes to education, Scott said.

"It is time to include 21<sup>st</sup> century learning options in the 21<sup>st</sup> century," he said. "It is time to usher in a new era for education in Florida – one based on the foundation that education should be 100 percent about the students and not the system."

One of those parents taking advantage of choice is Maria Quinones-Garcia. When she saw that her grandson Silas Lopez was performing poorly academically in school and associating with the wrong crowd, she quickly sought out a better solution with the tax credit scholarship.

Soon after enrolling at Victory Christian Academy in Lakeland, Silas' grades improved and his circle of friends changed. A standout student in the classroom and on the football field, Silas told Scott and corporate donors whose contributions fund the program that because of the scholarship, he now has a future that includes college.

"You have given me a second chance at success," he said. "I will do my best to make you proud."

Like Silas, former scholarship recipient Denisha Merriweather's future was also uncertain until she enrolled in the program. Merriweather, now a freshman at the University of West Florida in Pensacola, said there are many other success stories.

"There are thousands of other students just like me and Silas who have been able to turn their lives around thanks to this program and its dedicated donors and supporters," she said.

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The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship provides educational options for students from households whose income meets federal guidelines for free and reduced-price lunch. Corporations receive a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for contributions to scholarship organizations that then provide annual private school tuition scholarships of up to \$4,106 or a \$500 transportation scholarship to attend an out-of-district public school. This year, the scholarship is serving about 33,000 low-income students in 1,093 different private schools across the state.

The event's featured donor, UnitedHealthcare, has contributed \$20 million to the program in the past two years, which has provided 4,819 scholarships.

"We are honored to be part of a program that is making such a profound impact on Florida's children and ultimately our future," said David Lewis, CEO of UnitedHealthcare of Florida, Central North Florida Division.

Additionally, American Strategic Insurance's contribution of \$5.6 million has provided more than 1,400 scholarships. Progress Energy also was recognized Thursday for its contributions.

"These companies are turning around the lives of thousands of students who wouldn't have this opportunity otherwise," said John Kirtley, chairman of Step Up For Students.

Since the scholarship's creation, corporations have redirected more than \$650 million to scholarships for needy students.

This year's celebration was made possible by the following sponsors: Winn-Dixie Stores, Inc.; Florida Lottery; Great Florida Bank; Progress Energy; Bealls, Inc.; Dunkin' Donuts; Valpak; Walgreens; and UnitedHealthcare.

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