

Donation goes to 2 public schools

BY TOM MARSHALL
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TAMPA — John Kirtley is known in Florida as the man who runs the state's tax-credit scholarship program and pushes private school vouchers.

But on Tuesday, the Tampa-based venture capitalist did something new, donating \$100,000 to a pair of public schools in Hillsborough County. He said it will be matched by \$100,000 in grant money from the Walton Family Foundation, a charity created by the founders of Wal-Mart that has supported public school choice.



John Kirtley is an advocate of private school vouchers.

Kirtley said the single-gender academies opening this fall at Franklin and Ferrell middle schools are “proof that the district is committed to ensuring that even our most disadvantaged children have high-quality options.”

Hillsborough superintendent MaryEllen Elia has made no secret of her unease over the idea of using public money for private schools. At an earlier budget workshop, she said there's no good way to track whether special-needs students in a state voucher program receive a decent education.

But last year, she and the teachers union partnered with Kirtley's Step Up for Students organization to train private school teachers.

At Tuesday's news conference, Elia called Kirtley a “tireless advocate for children” and said his support for public magnet schools was something else they could agree on.

“All parents should have choice,” Elia said. “We believe that.”