



Florida School Choice Fund
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IMPORTANT UPDATES ON SCHOOL CHOICE IN FLORIDA

Donor Corner: HCA

With more than 100 hospitals and healthcare facilities throughout the state of Florida, HCA Healthcare is committed to the health and well-being of Floridians. HCA is also playing a vital role in the success of Florida's youth through its outstanding support of Step Up For Students. From providing funds for scholarships to producing television commercials promoting the scholarship program, HCA has demonstrated its commitment to the success of Florida's students.

The corporation joined Step Up For Students (SUFS) in 2005 and since that time it has contributed \$42,275,000 – providing scholarships for more than 11,178 students. HCA's own employees even benefit from the scholarship program with more than 45 employees statewide currently receiving scholarships for their children. In addition to funding scholarships for thousands of children, HCA has assisted in the passage of legislation to expand and improve the scholarship program.

"HCA is proud to support the mission of Step Up For Students," said Bryan Anderson, HCA's Vice President for Government Relations. "By en-

hancing access to scholarship funding for qualified students, we are helping to insure a stronger and more qualified workforce in Florida for years to come."

HCA has recently furthered its commitment to SUFS by generously donating time, resources and funds to produce two different television commercials promoting the scholarship program. One commercial features Melody Cherfil, a 2006 high school graduate and former SUFS scholarship recipient who is now pursuing a career in nursing. The second commercial features legendary NFL football coach Don Shula and several SUFS scholarship recipients. In addition to creating, producing and covering the cost to air the commercials, HCA also filmed extra footage to be used by SUFS for future public service announcements (PSA), as well as still-frame shots to be used for future publications. We invite you view the commercials at www.stepupforstudents.org.

We commend HCA Healthcare for going above and beyond to contribute to the success of the scholarship program and, ultimately, Florida's youth.



Legendary NFL coach Don Shula was filmed for the commercial at Northwest Christian Academy in Miami.

AT&T



AT&T Florida president Marshall Criser III, center, joins students from North Florida Christian with a \$3.2-million check presentation.

Florida Attorney General Bill McCollum and AT&T representatives joined more than 30 students, including 10th grader Jasmine Salter, for a hands-on Internet safety session at North Florida Christian School in Tallahassee on March 11.

Jasmine proudly thanked corporate donors, particularly AT&T, for their contributions to the Step Up For Students scholarship program. She said that attending a private school would otherwise have been impossible because her single mother is on a fixed income. "Step Up For Students gave me a second chance in school and the opportunity to reach my full potential," said Jasmine.

AT&T first joined Step Up For Students in 2008 and has donated \$3.2-million.

"AT&T has a long history of promoting academic achievement and opportunity and we are honored to support Step Up For Students," said Marshall Criser III, president of AT&T Florida. "Our contribution to this outstanding program will open many doors and provide scholarships to more than 800 economically disadvantaged students. We hope our participation in Step Up For Students enables them to increase their knowledge and skills as they pursue their education."

Both AT&T and the attorney general make children's safety a priority, particularly when it pertains to cybercrime. McCollum encouraged the business community to continue cooperative efforts against cybercrime, including community outreach. The event was an extension of AT&T's Internet educational efforts launched three years ago with the AT&T Hometown Tour.



NEWSLETTER



2009 LEGISLATION | More coverage inside

Lawmakers give strong bipartisan support to Step Up improvements

Florida lawmakers have voted again to strengthen the Step Up For Students Scholarship Program, and they did so this spring in a remarkable bipartisan fashion.

The bill that diversifies the funding base and simplifies the application process was passed in the House and Senate in late April by a combined margin of 123-34. Eight years after the program was created with only one Democratic vote, HB 453 was supported by nearly half the Democrats, a majority of the Black Caucus and all of the Hispanic Caucus.

"It's so gratifying to see how far we have come politically," said John Kirtley, chairman and founder of Step Up For Students, the nonprofit scholarship organization that distributes the scholarships. "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 was sponsored in the House by Rep.

Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel and in the Senate by Sen. Andy Gardiner, R-Orlando, but lawmakers from all parts of the state were impressed by the number of parents and principals and choice supporters who contacted them in support of the program. A week before the House voted, some 200 parent and student activists participated in a "Capitol Blitz" and met with individual lawmakers.

As the bill was debated, many lawmakers took notice of those families and the successes their children are enjoying.

The Step Up program, which is also called the "Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program" in the bill, now serves about 23,400 students whose families' household income meets the threshold for free and reduced lunch. They receive scholarships worth up to \$3,950 to attend nearly 1,000 private K-12 schools around the state. Gov. Charlie Crist is expected to sign the bill sometime in May or June, and it would take effect on July 1.



Rep. Weatherford, the bill's sponsor, gave Step Up high praise: "This program is recognized nationally as a model for what a corporate tax scholarship program should be. And we can't afford *not* to support a program such as this."

The ABCs of the Legislation

a

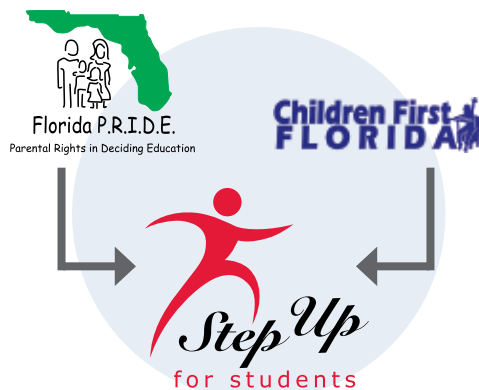
The program is currently funded through contributions made by corporations that receive a dollar-for-dollar credit against state corporate income taxes for up to 75 percent of their tax liability. As of July 1, insurance companies will be able to take the same credit for insurance premium taxes.

b

If families have been certified for state income-based programs, such as food stamps and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, they will not need to recertify their income when applying to receive a Step Up Scholarship. This will be active for the 2010 application season.

c

If requested and paid for by scholarship funding organizations, school districts will be required to inform recipients of free and reduced lunch about the scholarship opportunity.



Merging to Step Up

Come July 1, Step Up is itself stepping up. The two nonprofit organizations that distribute K-12 scholarships throughout Florida, previously known as Children First Florida and Florida P.R.I.D.E., are combining efforts to make the process more efficient for families and schools.

Their new name: Step Up For Students.

Most families already have seen evidence of the change, as offices in Tampa, Jacksonville, Orlando and Miami have begun working together to serve the 23,400 students and 1,000 schools on the program. Cindy Forster, who previously served as executive director of Children First, already has taken over as executive director for the merged operations.

"It's all about the children," Forster says. "Everything we do to establish statewide processes over the next year will be

with that thought in mind. We want to make helping these students as easy as possible for our families and schools."

Information about the scholarship program is now available from one web site, www.stepupforstudents.org. That site includes a place for parents and school administrators to log in for access to personalized services, including applications. The Carrie Meek Foundation, which serves part of Miami-Dade County, will remain unchanged.

INSIDE: Graduation season brings a double-double dose of achievement



2009 LEGISLATION

Blitzing lawmakers in the Capitol

On April 14 and 15, little more than a week before the House voted to strengthen Step Up For Student Scholarships, more than 200 parents and students and program supporters traveled to Tallahassee to “blitz” the Capitol. Their efforts helped produce a monumental success.

“We got feedback from all corner of the Capitol, and lawmakers were impressed with the message of our parents,” says Step Up For Students president Doug Tuthill. “When they can hear firsthand how the scholarships help students, it makes a tremendous difference.”

Supporters came from throughout the

state, including those who boarded buses in Miami before midnight and traveled all through the night. The participants donned special T-shirts that helped them stand out as they walked the hallways of the Senate and House office buildings. They met face-to-face with legislators and asked support for the program and the bill. Over the course of the two days, they participated in more than 70 different legislative appointments and countless other unscheduled conversations.

Dunkin Donuts and **Winn-Dixie** helped to sponsor the event by providing food and refreshments for the attendees.



Rep. Ron Saunders of the Florida Keys, center, was visited by a delegation from South Florida.



Rep. Ronald Brisé of Miami, right, a program supporter, was visited by Blitz participants from the Miami area.



Senate bill sponsor Andy Gardiner, center, was visited by students and parents from the Orlando area.



This is the official newsletter for Step Up For Students, published four times a year.

About Step Up For Students: Our mission is to help alleviate the enormous educational challenges faced by children from low-income and working class families. The scholarships allow these students to consider a private school or an out-of-district public school that may better suit their individual needs. This choice is not based on whether the public school is judged as succeeding or failing. Rather, it recognizes that different children learn in different ways and that our collective struggle is to help the students who often are at the greatest disadvantage in modern education.

- Chairman: **John Kirtley**
- President: **Doug Tuthill**
- Chief Financial Officer: **Kim Dyson**
- Development Director: **Kerri Vaughan**
- Scholarship Director: **Cindy Forster**
- Director of Community Outreach: **Michael Benjamin**
- Communications Director: **Jon East**
- Communications Specialist: **Jillian Metz**

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Two St. Petersburg lawmakers speak out



Rep. Bill Heller, a Democrat from St. Petersburg, told colleagues on the House floor: “I want to talk to you about a little guy who was in the public schools in the second grade and he was having trouble. And he was losing confidence in himself. He was losing his self-concept and was having great difficulty — coming home at night not feeling good and his mom not feeling good about his particular progress. 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.”



Rep. Darryl Rouson, a Democrat from St. Petersburg, told colleagues on the House floor: “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.”



STUDENT SPOTLIGHTS

Graduation 2009: A double-double dose of achievement

▣ Justina and Shauna Mason

Agape Christian Academy, Orlando

Justina and Shauna Mason knew their mother never went to college, but they also knew she was determined they would follow a different path. So school always came first, and their mom used every opportunity to reinforce her message. They still remember the days she would drive them through rundown as well as handsome neighborhoods and urge them to see those separate destinations as a function of education.

“She always showed us that you can’t go anywhere without an education,” daughter Justina says. “That’s the most important thing to being successful.”

As high school graduation approaches on May 28, Justina and Shauna Mason are ready to fulfill that dream. Four years after they entered Agape Christian Academy on a Step Up For Students Scholarship, the twin daughters of Yvette Mason in Orlando are graduating as twin academic towers. They are leaving high school as co-valedictorians with perfect 4.0 grade point averages. Their new principal, Earl Barnett, just shakes his head in admiration.

“From my very first meeting with them, I could see these were high academic achievers,” Barnett says. “They have the focus and the commitment and the overall vision of what they

want to do.”

That vision, shared by both Justina and Shauna, includes a nursing degree from the University of Central Florida, and they are already taking the first step with registration this fall at nearby Valencia Community College. Both students enjoy science and chemistry and say they are ready to get started. They look back at their years at Agape Christian and think the small class sizes and personal attention they received from teachers there were invaluable.

Their mother Yvette has been equally pleased with the school. She was the one who decided, after her daughters weren’t as focused in their public middle school as she wanted, to make the change for high school. She heard about the Step Up program, which serves students from households with income that meets the standard for free and reduced lunch, and decided to look at private school options.

Agape Christian, with a total K-12 enrollment of 489 students and a broad range of services, was the one she chose. The academy also served 219 Step Up scholarship students in 2008-09.

“I ask a lot of questions,” says Shauna, “and the teachers really break it down for you. If you have trouble with something, they will be there to help you.”



▣ Maegan and Mitchell Anderson

Trinity Christian Academy, Deltona

Maegan Anderson is three minutes older and one-hundredth of a point higher than her brother Mitchell, but age and grade point average are not their only similarities. Five years after they first began receiving a Step Up For Students Scholarship, the twins walk across the stage at Trinity Christian Academy in Deltona on June 5 to receive a high school diploma that only begins to explain their achievement.

Maegan and Mitchell, GPAs of 4.2 and 4.19 respectively, will leave high school just two credits shy of an associate degree in college.

“They are simply amazing kids,” says Trinity headmaster Dennis Robinson. “They are exemplary across the board.”

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 only because the science course schedule conflicted with their church commitments.

In fact, the twins never seem to take a break. Both played multiple varsity sports, with Mitchell landing a

scholarship at Carson-Newman College in Tennessee to be a football kicker. Both were involved in church, with Maegan singing in the choir and Mitchell traveling on goodwill missions to places like Nassau. Both helped at a local day care center. This summer, Maegan is eager to finish her required science courses so that she might begin at the University of Central Florida this fall as a junior.

“They really do help each other in a lot of ways,” says their mother, Elke Anderson. “They try to support each other.”

Mrs. Anderson decided five years ago that her twins needed a different place to learn. She felt the public school they attended was too big and overcrowded, and that their academics could suffer without a more nurturing environment. They ended up ultimately at Trinity, 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. She says the teachers always make themselves available to students, even after school is out. About 110 students at the school are on a Step Up scholarship.