



NEWSLETTER



Schools are open again: Thousands of scholarship students have returned to schools across Florida this fall, and Mrs. Rachael Hall leads her eager first-grade class at Indian Rocks Christian School in Largo. (See Indian Rocks story on Page 2.)

Changes at Step Up herald new era for families, schools

Some big changes at Step Up For Students have eased the application process for families new to the program and for those who are coming back, and they have helped set the scholarship program on a path to steady growth.

A new 12-person call center has fielded more than 65,000 calls and is providing answers to parent questions during what has become the busiest application season in the program's history. The program also has made an online application available to thousands of parents for the first time this season and made application fees payable electronically to thousands more. The result is that the document processing and application processing teams have this year handled more than 30,000 applications requesting scholarships for nearly 45,000 individual students.

“Our goal has always been, and remains, exceptional customer service”

JOHN LeHOCKEY
Step Up For Students scholarship director

To make all this happen, Step Up administrators have hired more staff and moved the scholarship operation into larger office space to accommodate the program's

growth and to come up with ways to improve customer service. While many of the changes are largely invisible to parents and schools, administrators say they think the changes are responsible for some positive feedback the program has been getting (See story on Page 2).

“Our goal has always been, and remains, exceptional customer service,” said John LeHockey, Step Up's executive director of scholarship operations. “These changes are just the start. As we expand, we'll focus on the tools that provide better services and guidance to not only our families, but for our schools as well.”

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STEP UP STATS

Sept. 28-30

First quarterly scholarship checks issued

95.4

Percent approval rating among parents who participated in Step Up For Students

1,251

Number of private schools participating for 2010-11

\$4,106

Maximum amount of Step Up scholarship for 2010-11, up from \$3,950

28,927

Number of students receiving scholarships for 2009-10

1,033

Number of private schools that taught scholarship students in 2009-10

Step Up continues to register parent satisfaction

Some randomly selected scholarship parents in Orlando and Tampa got the chance to speak their mind last month, and Step Up For Students administrators were pleased with what they heard.

“Usually when I talk to groups about things they’re pretty positive about, there’s a period when, about halfway through the session, things go south and the dark edges peek out,” said Robert Iles, the managing director for the Study Hall research group in Tampa, which conducted the interviews. “I’m not getting that from you.”

While a desire to choose the right school for their child united the parents, they all had a different reason for choosing the program. For some, the right school focused on curriculum and academics. For others, extra-curricular activities were important, as were small classroom sizes, strict policies about bullying and a safe environment. Nearly all said faith played a role in their school choice; many, in fact, first heard about the program through their church.

“I feel humbled,” one parent said. “Just knowing there is a program out there to help economically challenged people such as myself during these times is quite humbling.”

The responses from these interviews marked the second time in as many months that Step Up has benefitted from research showing that parents are overwhelmingly satisfied with the program. Earlier this summer, Northwestern University researcher David Figlio released the results from his independent survey that showed a 95.4 percent approval rating among parents who participated in Step Up For Students. Of that total, 75.1 percent said their schools were excellent and 20.3 percent were good.

“I feel grateful to have the opportunity and proud that I took the step to find out what it was. It was tough because I knew my daughter wanted to go to public school. But I knew she needed a smaller school.”

“I didn’t get the opportunity to go to a private school, even though my parents wanted to send me to a private school”

“My son has a positive male role model. That means a lot to me.”

Here’s what parents had to say when asked what the program meant to them:



My son was having a hard time in public school. To see him go from struggling to getting As – that’s just amazing for me to see that.”

I feel empowered because I’m able to give my daughter an education she deserves, but only because of [Step Up]. I think every child deserves that.”

If I wanted to take my kid to another school, we as parents get the choice. We get to choose the school!”

DONOR CORNER

Alcoholic Beverage Industry Contributes More Than \$38 Million to Step Up For Students

This past spring, the Florida Legislature expanded the Step Up For Students program to now offer tax credit opportunities to companies in the alcoholic beverage industry. In just a few short months since this bill became law, 13 companies in this industry have signed up to redirect their alcoholic beverage excise tax to the scholarship program. Their contributions so far are totaling more than \$38 million, which will provide over 9,000 scholarships for low-income children throughout Florida.

The bill, which passed with strong bipartisan support and went into effect on July 1, 2010, allows any company that pays Florida alcoholic beverage excise tax to redirect up to 90 percent of that tax liability to a state-approved scholarship funding organization to fund K-12 scholarships for low-income children.

As with companies that redirect their corporate income or insurance premium tax liability, the alcoholic beverage companies participating in the program receive a 100 percent tax credit for their redirection. This allows corporations to redirect the funds it already owes the state of Florida to provide additional educational opportunities to low-income children at absolutely no cost to the company – making the program truly a win-win opportunity for all involved.

Aside from helping economically disadvantaged children succeed in school, many of these companies are already actively engaged in work to improve their communities through education. Dedicated to the health and well-being of their consumers, a common thread among many of these companies is implementing educational and awareness programs

to prevent underage drinking and alcohol abuse. Related activities include supporting “Project Graduation” alcohol-free celebrations at high schools, promoting designated driver programs and supporting retailer training programs to prevent the sale of alcohol to minors. Additionally, many of these companies contribute to the higher education of our youth by offering college scholarships and providing grants to fund higher education programs.

We applaud all of our friends in the alcoholic beverage industry for being responsible corporate citizens and for making a difference in the lives of Florida’s children. If your company is interested in learning more about how you can get involved in this beneficial program and earn free tax credits, please visit www.stepupforstudents.org or call (866) 344-9553.

SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT Indian Rocks Christian School/Largo

When Indian Rocks Christian School opened its doors in 1984, its classrooms were devoted to 42 pre-school and kindergarten students. Twenty-six years and thousands of students later, Indian Rocks has blossomed into a K-12 campus that boasts accreditations from several top associations and more than 500 students.

Over the years, Indian Rocks has sought to provide its students an education that fosters both their academic and spiritual growth. Advanced placement, dual credit and honors programs are available to students, 99 percent of whom go on to attend college. Indian Rocks students are tested annually using the Stanford Achievement Test.

In addition, students are required to devote themselves to serving others and must complete 20 hours of community service for each year they are enrolled in the high school.

But the school environment isn’t all study and no play. Students also are able to participate in activities outside the classroom that are just as important in their development, such as sports, Superintendent Don Mayes said.

“We use balance,” he said. “That has characterized our school. We balance the academic and the athletic and the character building.”

Indian Rocks students can enhance their learning experience through participation in the school’s missions program, Ministry Mester. Open to high school students, the program began in 2000 with just six students traveling to one country and has grown to include more than 100 students serving 13 countries. Eleuthera, El Salvador and the Dominican Republic are just a few of the international locations Indian Rocks students have visited. Mission trips to Tennessee, Montana, and Miami are available for those who wish to serve a little closer to home.

“It gets students in the mindset to see how other people live, caring for other people and dealing with materialism in their own lives,” Mayes said.

Mayes, who has headed the school since 2001, said Indian Rocks has managed to keep its academic offerings strong and missions program intact despite the effects of the recession on the school’s enrollment. The school serves 700 students, 30 of whom are Step Up For Students Scholarship recipients. The average annual tuition ranges from \$4,400 to \$8,800.

“Some of our families wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for Step Up For Students,” said Kelly Jones, Indian Rocks’ finance director.



Ms. Bev Wright keeps her first graders active and engaged.

Students, schools get high marks in two new reports

CONTINUED
FROM PAGE 1

New independent research on Step Up For Students Scholarships has delivered a double dose of encouraging news: Both the scholarship students and the public schools they leave behind are improving.

John Kirtley, chairman and founder of Step Up, said the two studies make an important point: "Our main focus is to provide learning options to low-income families who could not otherwise afford them, but it thrills us to see traditional public schools improving as well. It just underscores the fact that this scholarship program helps strengthen public education overall."

The first report, released June 2, was written by respected Northwestern University economics and social policy

professor David Figlio. He found that the creation of the scholarship program in 2001 led immediately to academic improvements in the public schools that were the most likely to lose students to the learning option. The gains were the largest in the public schools with the greatest number of nearby private schools and those with the greatest incentives to keep federal money they received based on the number of lower-income students.

"Our results indicate that the increased competitive pressure faced by public schools associated with the introduction of Florida's FTC Scholarship Program led to general improvements in public school performance," Figlio wrote.

The second report, issued June 11 by the state Department of Education, covered the 2008-09 nationally norm-referenced tests that scholarship students are required to take. It found that the scholarship program is attracting students who had "significant" academic problems in public schools and that those same students achieved the same gains in reading and math as students of all income levels nationally.

"The typical student participating in the program tended to maintain his or her relative position in comparison with others nationwide," the report stated. "It is important to note that these national comparisons pertain to all students nationally, and not just low-income students."

The program is on pace to meet or exceed the 16 percent growth in students served last year, which totaled 28,927 students at 1,033 schools throughout Florida. The scholarship providing private school tuition assistance now pays as much as \$4,106 and is set to increase as the program grows year to year. In addition, there are now more than 1,200 private schools statewide that will accept a Step Up For Students scholarship.

The demand has long been obvious, which explains why a strong bipartisan coalition of lawmakers in Florida voted last spring to raise the annual cap on tax-credited contributions that corporations make to the program. The cap was raised this year to \$140 million, and it will grow by 25 percent after 90 percent of the cap is reached in the prior year. When the cap goes up, so does the scholarship amount.

LeHockey, who has a history in the corporate world of organizing companies to make them more responsive to customer needs, went about making the changes he found necessary to meet the spike in demand. First, Step Up For Students took control over all application processing and ended its contract with the Private School Aid Service in Ohio. LeHockey then established a call center that eventually fielded hundreds of calls a day during the application season.

Also, LeHockey and his team, along with the help of Step Up information technology experts, made available some features of the application process to families who hadn't enjoyed the convenience until this year. The SmartAp online application was available to families on Florida's west coast for the first time this application season, and parents have made their satisfaction known. Additionally, parents on the east coast got to pay their fees online for the first time.

"We want to make sure that, as we grow, parents appreciate our customer service as much as they do our mission to help them find the school that best meets their children's needs," Step Up president Doug Tuthill said. "Clearly, our Scholarship Team has the formula to make that happen."

LeHockey, Benjamin extend talents to boards

Two names familiar to our Step Up stakeholders are now also helping to lead efforts dedicated to providing disadvantaged children and their parents with choices in education.

Michael Benjamin, who leads Step Up's grassroots efforts, has joined the national Board of Directors of the Black Alliance for Educational Options, while John LeHockey, Step Up's executive director of scholarship operations, has joined the Board of Directors of Florida's Coalition of McKay Scholarship Schools.

The McKay coalition provides oversight to the McKay Scholarship program for students with disabilities, which served nearly 21,000 students last year. LeHockey, a retired U.S. Marine Corps Colonel and sought-after corporate executive, will serve a two-year term on the McKay board that can be renewed in 2012.

Benjamin, who serves as the executive director of the Florida Alliance for Choices in Education and who helped launch the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship nine years ago, brings his leadership and skills at mobilizing statewide grassroots causes to a national effort at BAEO. In March, he was responsible for recruiting 5,521 parents, students and educators to a rally for a proposed expansion to the tax credit scholarship outside the state Capitol in Tallahassee. It was the largest parental choice rally in the nation's history. The Florida Legislature later passed the expansion with overwhelming bipartisan support.

"Michael has brought energy to a cause that has had a direct impact on the lives of Florida's most disadvantaged families," said Kevin P. Chavous, the chairman of BAEO's board and former councilman of Washington, D.C.

Benjamin also will, with BAEO vice chairwoman Deborah McGriff, co-chair the program planning committee for BAEO's Sixth Annual Seminar on Education Policy and Parental Choice sponsored by the Bailey and Sullivan Leadership Institute and the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard University.



**JOHN
LeHOCKEY**



**MICHAEL
BENJAMIN**

Free Online Parenting Tool

Parents who want to give their students a head start on the path to college can now do so with the click of the mouse.

Step Up For Students parents can now access College Bound, a free e-learning and online social networking program developed by GreatSchools. The program gives parents the tools needed to help their students excel academically and become college-ready high school graduates. Currently, the program is limited to parents with students in Kindergarten-2nd grade but in the future will be expanded to include other grades.

College Bound offers parents tips and lessons that they can complete at their own pace to help their children do well in school. Parents can practice what they've learned but there's no homework and no studying is required.

These lessons are customized by grade level and are available in Spanish as well as English. To enroll in the program, please visit our website:

English

www.collegebound.greatschools.org/register/stepupforstudents

Spanish

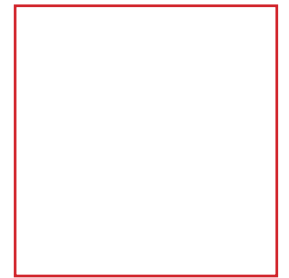
www.collegebound.greatschools.org/inscribir/stepupforstudents



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.

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IMPORTANT PROGRAM UPDATES IN THIS ISSUE

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT PATRICK SCHWEND

Coral Springs Christian Academy/Coral Springs



Eleventh-grader Patrick Schwend is beginning another school year at Coral Springs Christian Academy with a packed schedule of honors classes and band practices and membership in an honor society.

Not long ago, the first day of school was a different story for Patrick. Six years ago, he was a troubled fifth-grader attending a public school. He and his parents constantly met with teachers and administrators because of his behavioral problems and his academic performance was dismal.

Patrick's mother, Oristela, knew things only would get worse for her middle school student when he was placed in a remedial reading class with 50 other students and two teachers. School officials declined to remove Patrick from the class.

"It was chaos," she said.

Oristela and her husband, Roland, longed to move their son to a private school but couldn't afford the tuition. Then, Oristela learned about Step Up for Students Scholarship for low-income families. Seeing a glimmer of hope, the Schwends took advantage of the program's opportunity to send their son to a school where he they knew he would get the individual attention he needed.

Patrick's transformation was almost

immediate. As a sixth grader at Our Savior Lutheran School, Patrick was placed in a classroom with just 12 students. As one of the oldest students, Patrick became a classroom leader and the responsibility helped turn around his behavior. He participated in the school Science Fair, snagged several achievement awards and made the honor roll.

Patrick's academic success continues at Coral Springs Christian Academy, where he is in his sixth year on the scholarship. He takes three honor classes and plays saxophone with the school's band and its praise team. Patrick's involvement in music has him focused on studying the subject at Appalachian State University and pursuing a career in music management. Attending Coral Springs with Patrick is his brother, Daniel, a seventh-grader and his sister Jessica, a fourth-grader. Both are Step Up For Students recipients who also are excelling at the school, said Oristela.

At Coral Springs, Patrick said he's thrived there thanks to a school environment that fosters learning and pushes students to do their best.

"They challenge your skills in every class," he said. "It's really personal. You build a relationship with the teachers."

About Coral Springs Christian Academy

Established in 1971 as a pre-K and elementary school, Coral Springs Christian Academy in Coral Springs serves 750 students through grade 12, 17 of whom received the Step Up For Students Scholarship last year. The school offers a college preparatory curriculum and is accredited by the Association of Christian Schools International, the Florida Council of Independent Schools, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, and the Florida Kindergarten Council. The school uses the Stanford Achievement Test to measure students' progress. Tuition ranges from \$6,995 for kindergarten to \$9,995 for students in grade 12.