



NEWSLETTER



Application season, higher scholarship on the horizon

Step Up For Students has reached a key milestone this school year that will allow it to serve more students and pay larger scholarships in the coming school year. But parents should be forewarned: Demand for the program is higher than ever, and they should apply as quickly as possible to reserve their spots.

Applications for the 2011-12 school year open for existing families in early March, and scholarship administrators advise parents to begin the renewal process as soon as they can. Renewal students receive preference for scholarships as long as their applications are submitted by May.

"Because we had to close the application season early the last two years, we can expect more of the same, and the number of scholarships may be limited," said John LeHockey, the executive director for scholarship operations at Step Up For Students.

The milestone that Step Up reached is in fundraising. In December, just halfway through the new fiscal year, it reached the higher \$140 million scholarship cap that was set into law last year. As a result, the law triggers

two important changes for 2011-12. First, the statewide fundraising cap is increased to \$175 million, which allows for thousands of additional students to receive scholarships. Second, the amount of the scholarship increases from \$4,106 to a projected \$4,400. (The actual amount won't be known until a state budget is passed in the spring.)

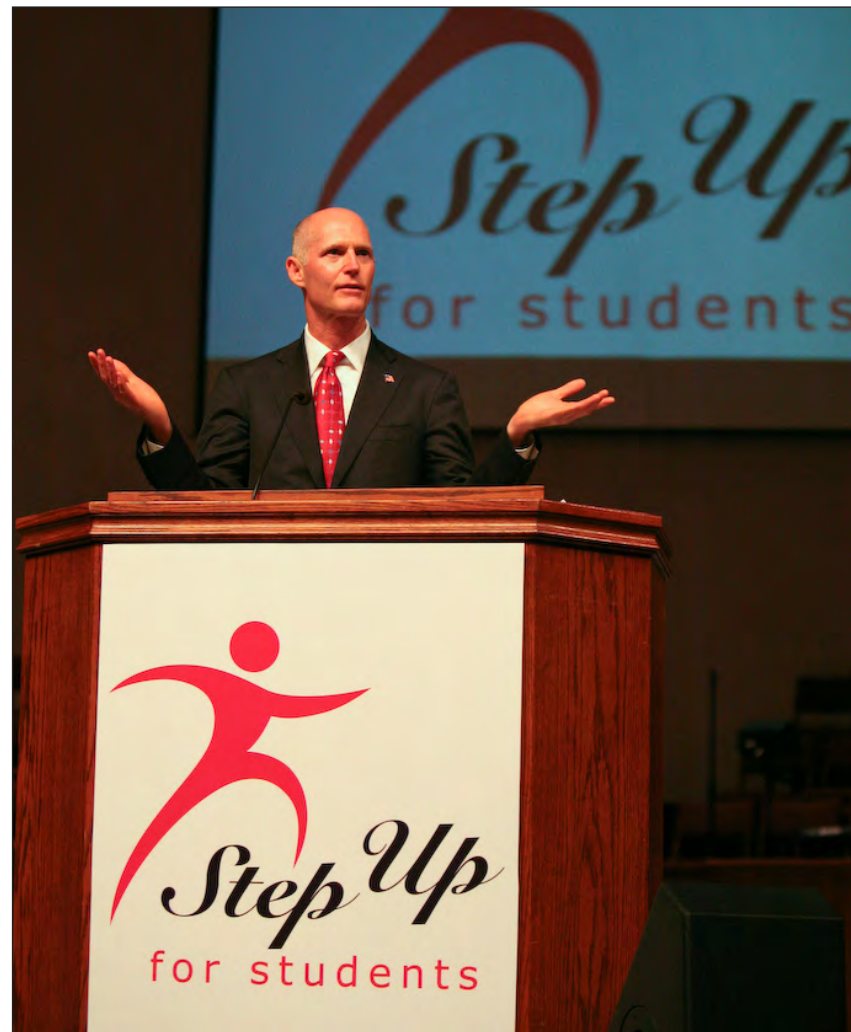
These changes will help to meet a growing demand among low-income families for this scholarship. As of the semester break, the scholarship was serving 33,000 students in 1,093 schools statewide. That is more than triple the number of students from just six years ago. The program stopped taking new applications for 2010-11 academic year barely three weeks after the school year began, something it's never done. Even after adding nearly 6,000 new students this year, the scholarship office still has a waiting list of 6,752 more.

Families renewing the scholarship will have priority when the new application season begins in early March. Only renewal families can apply during March and April. The season for new applicants is expected to begin in May.

What will be waiting for applicants?

Renewing parents will find some significant changes to the electronic application process, including a revamped SmartAp online application. Among the changes:

- An itemized listing of required documents
- The ability to submit supporting documentation by fax, e-mail or regular mail
- An enhanced log-in process
- More information about the application process behind the parent log-in
- E-mail alerts of important changes to the application status (for example, when more documentation is needed)
- The ability to print award letters
- The online address remains the same: www.stepupforstudents.org



Gov. Rick Scott addressed hundreds of students, educators and donors at the annual Step Up for Students donor appreciation rally at St. Petersburg Christian School. "A parent can always choose best," Scott said.

Florida governor addresses hundreds at donor rally

His message was clear. Mapping a student's education career begins with giving parents the power to choose the best learning environment for their child.

"A parent always can choose best," he said.

Gov.-elect Rick Scott spoke to hundreds in December about the critical role that parents have in their student's education at the annual celebration of Step Up For Students and the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship at Suncoast Cathedral in St. Petersburg. About 900 students from 27 schools attended the event.

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INSIDE: BIPARTISAN COALITION URGES CANDIDATES TO SUPPORT TAX CREDIT SCHOLARSHIP.

Step Up For Students Newsletter

A new blog puts Step Up leaders in the national education debate

John Kirtley and Doug Tuthill have forged a powerful presence in Florida education by building a diverse base of support for Step Up For Students and the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship. So it seemed natural that the two would bring their collaborative perspective to an often polarizing debate over education reform.

On Nov. 30, the two launched the education policy blog redefinED (www.redefinEDonline.org), and its mission is just as it sounds: Through this platform, Kirtley, the chairman of Step Up For Students, and Tuthill, the group's president, are exploring the new definition of public education, which includes an increasing array of options for all students. And the blog is driven by the belief that the definition of what constitutes public education is evolving and we need to have civil and frank discussions about it.



"Far too often, the debate over any education program begins first with an assessment of whether it undermines traditional neighborhood public schooling," reads the opening sentence to the blog's first post. "But today's school systems and public policies have exploded the historical definition of a public education. It's time our discourse did so as well."

Contributors to the blog have gone



**JOHN
KIRTLEY**



**DOUG
TUTHILL**

on to write brief essays almost daily, ranging from commentary on the changing landscape of public education in Florida to thoughts on a new unionism for teachers. Their work has captured the attention of some notable education bloggers in the nation and has already led, in some cases, to spirited public debates.

Andrew Rotherham, perhaps the nation's leading education blogger, told his readers about redefinED and wrote: "Broader focus than Florida and more issues than choice. Worth checking out." Blogger Mike Antonucci wrote "ditch one of the old ones and try this one out," and University of Arkansas education professor Jay P. Greene called redefinED "a great new blog out of Florida. The St. Petersburg Times Gradebook wrote: "Check the blog out. It could provide an interesting spark in our ongoing debates."

Universal Academy of Florida / Tampa

Sitting back from the road, Universal Academy of Florida's compact, nearly 9-acre campus in Tampa is a shady, beautifully landscaped space – an ideal setting for learning and growing. And that's exactly the focus at this school, which is the educational and cultural home for more than 400 students in a four-county area. About 138 students who attend Universal Academy are Step Up For Students scholarship recipients.

But the school's reputation exceeds its geographical boundaries. Universal Academy enjoys a nationwide renown as one of the top private Islamic schools in the country. The curriculum is centered on preparation for college and the school is a stop for recruiters from Ivy League institutions including Harvard, Princeton and Georgetown.

Universal Academy is perched for more growth as renovation of a new 20,000 square foot building nears completion and is set to open in January. The structure is a testament to how far Universal Academy has come since its humble start in 1992 in portable structures.



The school – where tuition can run between \$5,000 and \$6,500 – now boasts a computer classroom, two mobile computer labs, and a science lab. All students also can study Arabic, which is required learning for high school students. Extracurricular activities include the Science Club, Art Club, Student Council and the Humanitarian Outreach Club, which has raised money for cancer research and organized "Clean Up Days" in an effort to beautify the campus.

In the past three years, Universal Academy students have surpassed the state and national average on SAT, AP and ACT examinations, with some students earning perfect

scores. Among those who did was including last year's valedictorian who passed seven AP exams with six perfect scores of five.

The school also offers a variety of Advanced Placement courses including biology, chemistry and English. The program continues to be popular three years after its establishment, with sixteen students enrolled in the advanced classes this year, said Moosa Yahya, the school's business director.

Students' annual progress is tracked using the Stanford Achievement Test, with more than 30 percent of students scoring at or above the 90th percentile in math and/or English.

To keep the school moving forward and maintain its culture of excellence, school officials have established a number of objectives, including the installation of electronic whiteboards in all classrooms and becoming a paperless school.

KidCare available to uninsured children

Through Florida KidCare, the state of Florida offers health insurance for children from birth through age 18, even if one or both parents are working. KidCare is designed to provide affordable insurance with coverage that includes doctor visits, immunizations, dental care, emergency care, hospital stays and more. Most families pay \$15 or \$20 or nothing at all.

When families apply for the insurance, Florida KidCare will check which part the children may qualify for based on age and family income.

- **MEDIKIDS:** children ages 1 through 4.
- **HEALTHY KIDS:** children ages 5 through 18.
- **CHILDREN'S MEDICAL SERVICES NETWORK:** children birth through 18 who have special health care needs.
- **MEDICAID:** children birth through 18. A child who has other health insurance may still qualify for Medicaid.

For more information about the Florida KidCare program please visit, www.floridakidcare.org or call 1-888-540-5437. There are also community partners throughout Florida to provide additional information and assist families through the application process. Visit <https://www.healthykids.org/resources/marketing/community/> to find a community partner near you.

Fl  **rida
KidCare**

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.

339 S. Plant Avenue, Tampa, Florida 33606 Phone: (866) 590-5364



IN THIS ELECTION, OUR CHILDREN NEED OPTIONS TOO

To the honorable Alex Sink and Rick Scott:



As we approach this election for a new governor, we challenge both of you to find at least one clear patch of common ground in an education debate that too often divides us. Florida, which leads the nation in providing learning options to all students, offers one of those options to 29,000 of its poorest schoolchildren. We know firsthand how the Tax Credit Scholarship has helped turn around the lives of many underprivileged students, and we urge you both to join the cause.

Earlier this year, we marched to the Capitol as proud members of a bipartisan political coalition that simply wants to give struggling students more tools. We know a painful reality – that nearly half of all low-income students read below grade level. And we're frankly tired of arguing over whether their education is best delivered in a district school, a charter school, an online school or a scholarship school. Parents don't care. They just want a place that is safe and academically stimulating and helps their children become successful adults.

Antonio Trigo, raised by his grandmother since he was 5, is one such student. He was near failing and constantly in fights before his grandmother put him in a scholarship school in the seventh grade. His turnaround was so profound that by the end of eighth grade he was named valedictorian. Now a sophomore at Miami Union Academy, a small Seventh Day Adventist school with mostly Haitian-American students, Antonio is scoring two years above his grade level on standardized tests and sees college in his future.

The students served by this scholarship live, on average, only 17 percent above poverty. Three-fourths are black or Hispanic, three-fifths come from single-parent homes, and a state researcher found they were among the lowest-performing students in the public schools they left



behind. So we implore both of you to join our bipartisan cause, a cause endorsed by an extraordinary majority of the Legislature's Black and Hispanic Caucuses. These are the very students for whom our state's commitment to equal educational opportunity is a moral imperative. In this arena, party labels should never matter.

Will you publicly state that you will protect this learning option and allow more poor children to choose it?



JULIO FUENTES
founder and president of the Florida Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, representing 37 chapters and 80,000 minority businesses, and CEO of Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options



REV. C. E. GLOVER
representing the Black Ministers Parental Choice Alliance, which includes more than 30 ministers and 50 churches across Florida.



JOSE FERNANDEZ
director of the Florida League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), representing nearly 20 civil rights councils



KEVIN CHAVOUS
chairman of the Black Alliance for Educational Options, representing 4,600 members and 288 black elected officials



RABBI MOSHE MATZ
director of Agudath Israel of Florida, representing roughly 100 rabbis and synagogues



LORENA CASTILLO
chairwoman of the Coalition of Hispanic Instructors in Support of Parental Awareness, representing 78 public school teachers mostly in Dade and Broward counties



REV. H. K. MATTHEWS
leader in the historic civil rights struggle in Florida who marched with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma

HISPANIC CREO PAID FOR THIS ADVERTISEMENT



On March 24, 5,521 low-income parents, students, educators and activists marched to the State Capitol in support of the Tax Credit Scholarship.

A diverse group of advocates for the Step Up For Students Scholarship entered the Florida campaign arena in October to challenge the candidates to support learning options for low-income children. At a press conference in Fort Lauderdale and in a full-page advertisement in the Tallahassee Democrat, the group pressed its case that: "In this election, our children need options too." The group included influential representatives from business, education, clergy, and civil rights groups. Julio Fuentes, president of the Florida Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and the group's organizer, explained his objective in a newspaper commentary: "The reason a coalition of black, Hispanic and Jewish leaders in Florida is so passionate about learning options for poor children is much the same reason people across this country are being reduced to tears by a new documentary film called Waiting For Superman. What hurts us is to see any child denied a genuine education opportunity."



About 900 students visited St. Petersburg Christian School for the seventh annual rally celebrating donors and the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship.

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

"It is time to include 21st century learning options in the 21st 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 looked for a way to set him on the right track, and she sought that help through a Step Up For Students 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.

The scholarship is serving thousands more students this school year and lawmakers have given more companies the chance to contribute to Step Up. Enrollment has grown by more than 19 percent to about 33,000 low-income schoolchildren in 1,093 private schools throughout Florida, and the program is on track to serve thousands more next year with a larger scholarship amount (See 'Application season, higher scholarship on the horizon,' front).

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

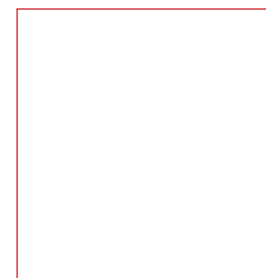
"We are honored to be part of a program that is making such a profound impact on Florida's children and ultimately our future," said David Lewis, CEO of UnitedHealthcare of Florida, Central North Florida Division.

"These companies are turning around the lives of thousands of students who wouldn't have this opportunity otherwise"

JOHN KIRTLEY
Step Up For Students chairman

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

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



IMPORTANT APPLICATION INFORMATION IN THIS ISSUE

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT **JOSHUA BROWN**

Heritage Preparatory, Orlando, Florida



Joshua Brown, 12, wasn't performing terribly at his public school. His grades were high and he was enrolled in advanced classes.

Still, his mother Aquanas Brown didn't think her son was fully stimulated. And the social environment at Joshua's school wasn't learning-focused.

"I was a little concerned about that because it seemed (the students) just wanted to play," she said. "If you have a focused child, you want to keep them focused."

Brown knew from experience that Joshua was headed for trouble if he remained at a school that wasn't the right fit for him. Joshua's older sister, Chanel, began her school career an excellent student but by the fourth grade, was failing math and performing poorly on exams.

Aquanas knew that a different academic setting was best for Chanel. After a neighbor told Aquanas and her husband Paul about the Step Up For Students program, they decided to apply and use the scholarship to enroll Chanel at Heritage Preparatory in Orlando. Not wanting to leave anything to chance, Aquanas sought out scholarships for Joshua and another daughter, Tamar, and enrolled them at the same school.

That was five years ago. At Heritage, Joshua – now a 7th grader – is an excellent student

earning mostly straight As. Aquanas said the school's small, close-knit setting and one-on-one attention from teachers have helped Joshua reach his potential.

Joshua enjoys a close rapport with Heritage's principal and has established himself as a school leader, she said.

"Joshua focuses on school work here," she said. "He has goals and he keeps his grades up."

One of those goals is to be an orthodontist, Joshua said.

Joshua said he likes Heritage because the teachers do their best to help students succeed.

"They are really good," he said. "One teacher was really, really strict but now I see how that has helped me."

At Joshua's former school, students "would fight other kids" he said.

But at Heritage, everyone is focused on learning, he said.

"It challenges me," he said. "I'm not a person who likes to do things easily. I like a challenge."

Without Step Up For Students, Aquanas said she's certain that Joshua and his sisters would have struggled along in their old school. The program has turned their lives around for the better, she said.

"I'm really grateful for both the school and the scholarship," she said.

About Heritage Preparatory

Located in Orlando Fla., Heritage Preparatory School is a private school with college preparatory curriculum for students in pre-school through 12th grade. The school currently serves 230 children, 116 of which are Step Up For Students scholarship recipients. The school annually administers the Stanford Achievement Test. The annual tuition for grades K-12 is \$5,050, not including books, registration fees or uniforms.