



# NEWSLETTER



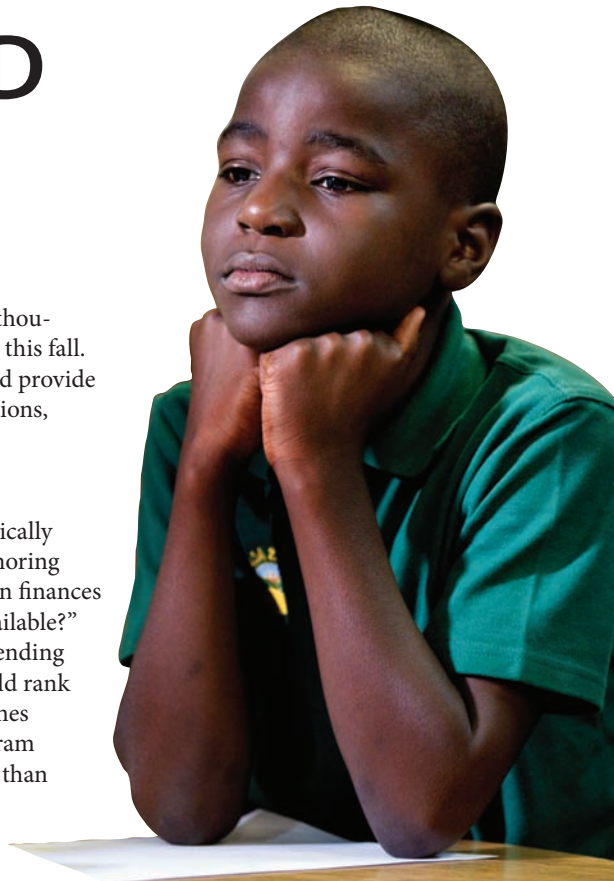
## LEGISLATION WOULD HELP THOUSANDS MORE STUDENTS

Florida lawmakers will decide over the next two months whether to let thousands more low-income students receive Step Up For Students scholarships this fall. Bills filed by Sen. Lizbeth Benacquisto and Rep. Richard Corcoran would provide a one-time \$31.3 million extra increase to the cap on tax-credited contributions, allowing the state to serve 6,500 more students in the 2012-13 school year. That increase would come on top of a \$43.7 million boost from the current law, setting a tax credit cap in 2012-13 of \$250 million.

"This is a simple issue for me," says Sen. Benacquisto. "We have economically disadvantaged students who are struggling in school. Their parents are clamoring for this learning option. And it actually saves the state money at a time when finances are tight. Why wouldn't we want to make sure this scholarship is readily available?"

Scholarship enrollment has been surging. About 38,000 students are attending nearly 1,200 private schools statewide this school year, an amount that would rank the program as the state's 22nd largest school district. That is nearly four times the number of students who were served just seven years ago, and the program has experienced waiting lists in the past two years that each exceeded more than 8,000 students.

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## Step Up taking applications earlier for 2012-13

Families who want to renew their Step Up For Students scholarship for the 2012-13 academic year can do so starting in early February.

From early February to early March, the scholarship program is dedicating its online application to renewal families only. Parents new to Step Up For Students can apply for the scholarship after the first of March.

Step Up For Students is opening its application season earlier to better accommodate the spike in demand the program has seen for the last couple of years. By last May, just two months after the program started taking applications for the current school year, about 12,000 students had joined a waiting list. There are currently about 38,000 students enrolled in the program receiving scholarships worth up to \$4,011.

The earlier start also gives families more time to submit the required documentation that shows how much income they earn and how many people are in their household. Step Up For Students also will hold longer hours for its Contact Center – from 8:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Friday, closing from 11 a.m. to noon every day.

The sooner families submit all the required documents the better, said John LeHockey, Step Up's executive vice president for scholarships. The scholarship program has enhanced its procedures to more quickly notify parents with updates on the status of their application, but applicants should still submit all their required documents showing income and household composition no later than April.

The longer parents wait, the longer it will take to process their applications, LeHockey said.

The application fee is \$30. The amount of the scholarship is expected to increase but won't be determined until the state Legislature decides in March what it will spend in per-student operational funding. The Step Up scholarship is tied to that amount.



**Step Up scholar Travis Blanks, a senior at North Florida Christian School in Tallahassee, greets Florida Gov. Rick Scott at the Governor's Mansion last fall. Scott hosted more than 100 people to celebrate Step Up For Students and its corporate sponsors.**

**READ THE FULL STORY INSIDE.**

## SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT

### Beacon of Hope Christian School/ St. Augustine

When Pastor LaVoy Newton and his wife Kelli opened Beacon of Hope Christian School in September 1999, just 18 students in grades K-8 were on the school's roster.

Fast forward 12 years, and Principal Mary Whitfield now is at the head of a school that boasts 153 students and shares a building with Lighthouse Church of God on 9.5 acres of land situated on the edge of St. Augustine. Beacon of Hope's emphasis on the arts has attracted a number of students and its sports teams are top contenders in the area. Its first senior class – seven students – graduated in 2010. Of the 13 total students who have graduated from Beacon of Hope, many have gone on to attend college, including the University of North Florida, the University of West Florida and St. Johns State College.

The school's transformation, however, was not without some challenges, Newton said.

Over the years, the school has grown in students and grade levels. However, when school officials added a freshman class in 2006, half of the eighth grade class transferred out because their parents were uncertain about the school's addition of high school grades.

School officials were slow to add preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds and voluntary prekindergarten classes, missing the opportunity to enroll dozens of new students.

Most recently, Newton and Whitfield have launched a campaign to boost enrollment after student numbers declined because of the economy's downturn. Currently, 63 Step Up scholars attend Beacon of Hope.

Things are ticking up. Last year, Beacon of Hope received a dual accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and Florida League of Christian Schools. The school also is accredited by the Church of God Association of Christian Schools. Student academic progress is evaluated annually using the

Stanford Achievement Test.

Although enrollment has slowed, the number of students transferring in at the high school level is now growing.

At Beacon of Hope, the school's drama, band and dance classes and activities are a critical component of the curriculum, Whitfield said.

Students can choose from a variety of arts-related activities and courses, including beginners and advanced band.

The school's sports program is equally popular. Basketball, football, volleyball and baseball are among the sports in which students in grade 6 and up can participate.

The addition of the sports program was critical to the school's expansion, Newton said.

"We started realizing that if we wanted to be successful, we had to have sports," he said.

Beacon of Hope also participates in academic bowl competitions, spelling bees and speech and fine arts contests.

Annual tuition is \$3,630 for all grades.

As the school moves forward, Newton said he and Whitfield and the school's staff of 28 are rededicating themselves to carrying out the four pillars of the school's mission – providing hope, one-on-one connections, a sense of partnership and education – to its students and community.

Equally important is fostering an environment where students of all abilities and backgrounds can thrive and feel welcome, Newton said.

Parents are attracted to the school's focus on building students up academically and spiritually.

"To us, success is where they start and where we can take them," he said.

## DONOR CORNER



In 2002, the Florida Legislature's vision extended an invitation to corporations to take an active role in providing educational opportunities for low-income children in Florida — an opportunity that Progress Energy enthusiastically pursued and became one of the founding donors of Step Up For Students.

Nearly 10 years later and \$42 million invested, Progress Energy's desire of creating an educated workforce for Florida's future coupled with its overwhelming generosity has provided 11,430 scholarships for low-income children in Florida to attend the school that best meets their individual needs.

"Progress Energy is honored to be one of the founding donors of Step Up For Students — an organization that is enriching the lives of Florida's less fortunate children with hope and opportunity," said Vincent Dolan, Progress Energy Florida president and chief executive officer. "We provide a service that touches millions of lives daily and through Step Up For Students, our pledge is to go beyond our core mission and invest in tomorrow's workforce."

Headquartered in Raleigh, N.C., Progress Energy is a Fortune 500 energy company that includes two major electric utilities that provides electricity to nearly 3.1 million customers in the Carolinas and Florida.

Progress Energy's charitable commitment extends beyond Step Up For Students. Through its registered 501(c)3 Foundation, Progress Energy invests in a wide variety of local organizations and initiatives to add to the overall quality of life in the areas it serves. Grants focus on energy education, environmental stewardship, economic vitality, and workforce development. In 2011, the Progress Energy Foundation invested nearly \$10 million in the communities it serves. The Progress Energy Foundation is funded each year by the company's board of directors from shareholder funds, and is not in any way related to a customer expense.

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## Florida governor celebrates Step Up donors

Gov. Rick Scott joined business and community leaders, along with Republican and Democratic lawmakers, in October at the Governor's Mansion in Tallahassee to thank the corporate donors of Step Up For Students.

More than 100 supporters helped Step Up celebrate and honor corporations for collectively contributing more than \$900 million to the scholarship program since 2002. Thanks to the generous contributions from donors, this year Step Up is giving nearly 38,000 low-income students the chance to attend nearly 1,200 private schools throughout Florida.

Gov. Scott praised the program and its donors and noted the importance of Step Up's continued success.

"For 10 years, the corporate community has helped turn around the lives of low-income children by helping to make scholarships available," Scott said. "The tax credit scholarship program is one of the many ways Florida is putting students first to make sure our state has the best educated workforce."

Step Up scholar Travis Blanks, a senior at North Florida Christian School in Tallahassee, shared his story at the reception. Blanks, who is graduating in December and is committed to play football at South Carolina's Clemson University, credited the scholarship for putting him on the path to college.

"My dreams are becoming a reality thanks to dedicated donors like you," he said.

The event featured special announcements from J. J. Taylor Distributing Florida, Inc., Walgreens and Winn-Dixie Stores Inc. representatives, all of which presented checks to Gov. Scott for Step Up For Students scholarships. Walgreens, a donor to the scholarship program since 2006, presented a check for more than \$27 million – the total amount the company has donated to the scholarship program throughout the years – while Winn-Dixie presented a check for \$5 million. J.J. Taylor Distributing, the newest corporate donor to the Step Up For Students program, pledged \$20 million to provide scholarships.



**M. Sandlin "Sandy" Grimm of Winn-Dixie Stores Inc. addresses guests at the donor appreciation event hosted by Gov. Rick Scott in October at the Governor's Mansion.**

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“Our hope is that this kind of increase in the number of scholarships will allow us to reduce and maybe eliminate the waiting list for students,” says Doug Tuthill, president of Step Up For Students. “Our goal is that this scholarship be available for any low-income student whose parent thinks it can help.”

Under the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship law that governs the program, new scholarships are available only to students whose household income qualifies them for free or reduced-price lunch. Any new student entering the program in grades 2 through 12 must also have attended a public school the prior year, but Rep. Corcoran’s bill would eliminate that public-school-attendance requirement. Under his bill, students who meet the income threshold could enter the program at any grade level no matter where they attended school the previous year.

The reason to eliminate the prior-year attendance requirement, according to Rep. Corcoran, is to address the hardship faced by families who lose jobs in difficult economic times. Students in those families who were attending private school because their parents could afford the tuition are not allowed to remain in their school even though their reduced household income qualifies them for the scholarship. Instead, if they are in grades 2 or higher, they must transfer to a public school for at least a year in order to meet the state requirement.

## A LEGISLATIVE Q & A Expanding Scholarship Opportunities

The State Legislature began its annual session on Jan. 10 this year and is scheduled to conclude on March 9. Sen. Lizbeth Benacquisto is sponsoring SB 962, and Rep. Richard Corcoran is sponsoring HB 859.

**Why increase the cap?** Both bills would provide a one-time extra increase in the tax credit cap in 2012-13 from \$218.7 million to \$250 million, allowing Step Up For Students to serve an additional 6,500 students. The reason is that interest in the scholarships has soared so much that the current formula for cap increases, which allows for up to a 25 percent increase annually, has not kept pace.

**How do we know businesses will give more?** For the past two years, businesses have been so eager to contribute that the statewide cap was reached within the first half of each fiscal year. The fundraising team for Step Up For Students says it is confident that trend will continue.

**Would this remove the public-school-attendance requirement?** The House bill, HB 859, would also remove the requirement that students entering the program in grades 2-12 have attended a Florida public school the previous year. That provision will be subject to financial analysis and is not currently in the Senate bill.

**Could this hurt the public school budget?** Preliminary indications from legislative budget analysts are that a cap increase will actually help the state budget. That’s because each scholarship next year will be worth only 68 percent of the basic operational amount that would be spent if the student attended a traditional public school.

**Do we know if this option is helping students?** Scholarship students are required to take a nationally norm-referenced test approved by the state. The most recent test report found: 1) Students who choose the scholarship are among the lowest performers in the public schools they leave behind; 2) They achieved the same gains in reading and math in 2009-10 as students of all income levels nationally.

**Who is receiving this scholarship?** Two-thirds of the students are black or Hispanic, and three-fifths live in a single-parent household. The average household income last year was only 21 percent above poverty – or just under \$26,000 for a household of four. They tend to be heavily concentrated in urban areas, including two zip codes in Orlando with more than 1,000 students.

## Historic advocates for school choice join redefinED

After a year of publication, the blog hosted by Step Up For Students chairman John Kirtley and president Doug Tuthill got a big boost from some bright minds on school reform.

The blog redefinED launched one year ago to moderate a frank and civil discussion about the evolving state of public education and its increasing array of options. It begins its second year with an alliance with the American Center for School Choice, a group whose co-founders similarly sought to lead a fair-minded dialogue about parental choices in education four years ago.

Those co-founders, University of California, Berkeley, law professors John E. Coons and Stephen D. Sugarman, had fought for equity in school finance in the 1970s, and their efforts led them to embrace school choice as a way to empower low-income families. Their advocacy took root at the American Center for School Choice, where they have joined scholars and legislators to elevate the conviction that school choice is a moral and civic imperative.

The center made its mission clear in its first post for the blog dated Oct. 11: “Our organization’s name was intentionally selected because we believe a strong political center and consequently a broad coalition for school choice exists in a focus on parental empowerment. In placing families first, the Center’s perspective creates a unique and powerful opportunity to expand support for school choice to include greater numbers of political centrists, religious leaders, social justice advocates, and ordinary citizens who are either uninformed or uninspired by current educational reform debates.”



JOHN E. COONS



STEPHEN D. SUGARMAN

## Step Up chairman receives commendation



Hillsborough County commissioners recently declared that they were proud to call Step Up For Students Chairman John Kirtley a resident of Hillsborough County. The county commission honored John with an official commendation on Nov. 2, noting particularly the \$200,000 gift he and Step Up For Students made last spring to support two single-gender preparatory academies in the Hillsborough County school district.

“Through the years, you have proven yourself as a leader in our community by empowering low-income families to be able to choose the right school for their children,” the commendation reads. “We are proud to call you a resident of Hillsborough County. Your leadership dedication and service, and a strong passion for high-quality education and school choice have made our community a great place to live, work and play.”



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## INFORMATION ON APPLICATIONS IN THIS ISSUE

# [ STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

### Kenzel Huggins/The Potter's House Christian Academy/Jacksonville ]



While his peers may spend their spare time visiting arcades or hanging at the mall, the public library is Kenzel Huggins' ideal place to hang out. A senior at The Potter's House Christian Academy in Jacksonville, Kenzel visits the library at least three times a week to study and indulge in his favorite pastime: reading.

It's a hobby that Kenzel took seriously early in his school career and that he believes has been critical in his development as a top scholar and in his recent selection as National Achievement semifinalist.

"Reading does open up new worlds," he said. "Not just taking you to other places, but the way you see the world. Reading acts like a guide in my development."

Those frequent trips to the library have paid off handsomely for Kenzel in school. A member of the National Honor Society who skipped the sixth grade, Kenzel scored a 2100 out of a possible 2400 on his SAT college entrance exam. Unsatisfied with that result, he recently retook the test in hopes of landing a perfect score.

Thanks to a 4.18 GPA, Kenzel is positioned to be the valedictorian for the class of 2012 and also takes classes at Florida State College. The future anthropologist wants to attend Duke University for college but school officials are pushing him to also consider applying to Ivy League schools Harvard and Brown.

Kenzel said the smaller class sizes and teachers' dedication to students at Potter's House also have been crucial to his success.

"I think if I had went somewhere else, I wouldn't have been anywhere where I am in terms of emotional or spiritual development," he said.

Recently, Kenzel was named one of 1,600 semifinalists nationwide for the National Achievement Scholarship Program, which honors the best and brightest black American high school seniors.

It's an honor that doesn't surprise teacher and assistant principal Lelah Johnson, who said she

can envision Kenzel using his talent for writing impressive term papers in a research-based career.

Kenzel's success in the classroom is strongly tied to his love for books and reading, she said.

"Kenzel has always found a way to read books," she said. "He's always made an effort to read."

Johnson said most impressive is Kenzel's dedication to school despite early-morning rises to catch public transportation to Potter's House, where he first enrolled as a fifth-grader. Kenzel attends Potter's House with the help of a scholarship from Step Up For Students. About 180 Step Up scholars attend the school.

Kenzel's always done well in school, but Sharon Rose was looking for a school where her son would get more quality time with his teachers when she transferred Kenzel and his brother Keyon – now a student at Florida Atlantic University – from their neighborhood school to Potter's House. The school is part of The Potter's House Christian Fellowship, where the family attends church.

Sharon said she's certain that without the scholarship from Step Up For Students, Kenzel "wouldn't be doing as well as he's doing."

"I'm grateful for it," she said.

### ABOUT THE POTTER'S HOUSE CHRISTIAN ACADEMY

Founded in 1996, The Potter's House Christian Academy is an extension of The Potter's House Christian Fellowship. About 180 Step Up scholars attend the school, which is accredited by the Florida Association of Christian Colleges and Schools and administers the Stanford Achievement Test.

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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