Elaine Perez takes a break from school orientation to talk to the News Journal about how her children benefit from the Step Up For Students program.

Step Up for Students program offers scholarships for low-income families

Elaine Perez and her son, Steven, are shown at the orientation. Steven, 13, is one of many children who benefit from the Step Up for Students program.

Thomas St. Myers

Said next to his mom Wednesday in a Lighthouse Private Christian Academy classroom, Steven Miller, 16, described his struggles at Bailey Middle School with brutal honesty.

"I'm not going to lie. I got kicked out of school a couple hundred times," Miller said.

His two older siblings managed just fine in Escambia County School District, but with Miller failing classes and spending countless hours in in-school suspension, his mom, Angela, decided last year to enroll him at Lighthouse. Her son flourished in the smaller classroom setting and made the A-B honor roll.

The $600-a-month tuition stretched the Millers thin, though, and Angela feared her son would have to return to public schools for the 2016-17 school year. Her financial fears subsided after the Lighthouse staff told her about Step Up for Students. The nonprofit scholarship funding organization offers the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program for low-income families and the Gardiner Scholarship for children with certain special needs.

The state Legislature passed the program in 2001. It is funded by corporate
Private

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contributions, and the corporations, in turn, receive dollar-to-dollar tax credits. The five tax sources for tax credits are corporate income, insurance premium, alcohol beverage excise, direct pay sales, and oil and gas severance. The amount of the scholarships depends on the total gross monthly household income and the number of people in the household.

Ron Madus, director of policy and public affairs for Step Up, said 79,000 students statewide participated in the program the past school year, and he expects that number to exceed 90,000 this school year.

Escambia County reflects the increased demand for the program. The number of students on the scholarship program in the county exceeds 1,500, an increase of about 300 from the previous school year.

Lighthouse is one of six schools in Escambia with a minimum of 100 students on the scholarship. Joanna Johannes, head of school at Lighthouse, said the school benefits tremendously from the program, particularly from a socio-economic standpoint.

“We wouldn’t have the mix of the socio-economic groups without it,” she said. “Private schools would just be going back to those who can afford it.”

Pensacola Catholic High School accepted Step Up students in 2013 after the program stopped requiring a student first be a public school invitee. Base tuition at Catholic costs $7,300 annually. Catholic finance director Mary Ann Stefancik said its enrollment spiked about 40 students after accepting Step Up students. Stefancik said Catholic supports the program and its mission to provide better education opportunities for low-income families and students with certain special needs.

Yet, seven state organizations filed a lawsuit in 2014 seeking to eliminate the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program. The lawsuit argues the program violates Article I, Section 3 and Article IX, Section 1 of the Florida Constitution.

Article I, Section 3: “no revenue of the state or any political subdivision or agency thereof shall ever be taken from the public treasury directly or indirectly in aid of any church, sect, or religious denomination or in aid of any sectarian institution.”

Article IX, Section 1: “adequate provision shall be made by law for a uniform, efficient, safe, secure, and high quality system of free public schools that allows students to obtain a high quality education and for the establishment, maintenance, and operation of institutions of higher learning and other public education programs that the needs of the people may require.”

Leon County Circuit Court Judge George Reynolds dismissed the lawsuit last year, but the Florida Education Association appealed the ruling to the 1st District Court of Appeal, which has yet to hear the case.

Two of the state organizations, Florida Association of School Administrators and the Florida School Boards Association, withdrew from the lawsuit before the PEA filed the appeal. That left the FEA, Florida Congress of Parents and Teachers, League of Women Voters of Florida, Florida State Conference of Branches of NAACP, and Florida members of the Americans United for Separation of Church and State as the plaintiffs.

Escambia Superintendent Malcolm Thomas loses out on 1,500 or so students and the full-time equivalent student state money they generate, but he and other members of the Florida Association of District School Superintendents decided against joining the lawsuit.

“We think, again, it’s a choice issue,” Thomas said. “The worst thing I could do as a school administrator is try to force someone where they don’t want to be.”

Why the Florida NAACP opposes the program is a bit puzzling. In Escambia, black students account for 50 percent of the scholarship recipients.

The News Journal left a message for Florida NAACP President Evelyn M. A. Obama to seek comment for the story. Nweze did not respond to the message, but she spoke earlier this year to Politico about the program. One of the NAACP concerns appears to be that the program targets only low-income families and children with certain special needs.

“It is in our founding principles of the NAACP that every child should have access to a quality education — not 5 percent of the children, not 10 percent of the children, but 100 percent of the children,” she said.

The NAACP stance is divisive in the black community.

Florida Tax Credit Scholarship eligibility

- If a member of the household receives SNAP, TANF or FDPIR, the student may qualify.
- If the household income qualifies for free or reduced-priced lunch, the student may qualify.
- If the household income is above the income criteria, the student may qualify.

Gardiner Scholarship requirement

This scholarship is for Florida students 3 years old through 12th grade or age 22, whichever comes first, with one of the following disabilities: autism spectrum disorder, muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, Prader-Willi syndrome, spina bifida, Williams syndrome, Phelan-McDermid syndrome or intellectual disability (severe cognitive impairment). Also, students ages 3, 4 or 5 deemed “high risk” due to developmental delays may be eligible for the year they apply. (Please note: Students must not be older than 5 on Sept. 1.)

- Students need an Individual Education Plan (IEP) from a Florida school district or a formal diagnosis from a Florida licensed physician or psychologist.
- Students must be at least 3 or 4 on or before Sept 1. Students entering kindergarten must be 5 on or before Sept 1. Students entering first grade must be 6 on or before Sept 1.
- Students can participate in the Gardiner Scholarship (PLSA) program as part of home education. However, they cannot be enrolled in a public school or receive any other state-sponsored scholarship (McKay Scholarship or the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship).

In May, the African American Ministers Alliance for Parental Choice established a petition calling for the NAACP to withdraw from the lawsuit.

Elaine Perez cringes at the idea of eliminating the scholarship program for low-income families. Step Up For Students allows her three children — 13-year-old Jelawil, 10-year-old Jelanie and 7-year-old Jeslaine — to attend Lighthouse.

Her son previously attended Pleasant Grove Elementary. Perez complimented the public school for providing him a solid foundation, but she preferred his middle-school years be somewhere that encourages students to be open about God and His role in their lives.

Step Up For Children provided her children that opportunity.

“His school is talking about God, and that’s what we want,” she said. “My husband and I, we want to encourage our kids to learn about God. It’s really important for us to have the Step Up, so we can put our kids here.”

For more information on Step Up For Students, visit stepupforstudents.org.

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