LOOKING FORWARD by looking back
For more than a decade, Step Up For Students has been empowering low-income families with the opportunity to find the best school for their children’s individual learning needs. Through the years, we’ve heard countless stories about how our K-12 scholarship program has made a tremendous difference in the lives of so many. Some of these stories you will read in this annual report. The program often is a lifeline for Florida families who otherwise wouldn’t have the means to find the best educational fit for their children. With our donors’ support, we do this so all children can have a chance at a life some never dared to imagine. With these stories, and the lessons learned from our past, we will continue building upon that foundation to make Florida stronger by providing our future leaders with the education they deserve. We promise to continue Looking forward by looking back to fulfill our mission so these children have a chance to succeed.
Dear Friends,

Parents and donors are continuing to fuel our extraordinary growth. The Chronicle of Philanthropy recently name Step Up For Students one of the 10 fastest growing charities in the country, and Forbes magazine says we’re now the nation’s 52nd largest charity. This past school year, 51,075 students attended school on a Step Up For Students Scholarship, and for the 2013-14 school year, we anticipate having more than 60,000 students on scholarship. At our current growth rate, we’ll have more than 100,000 students on scholarship during the 2017-18 school year.

Last Dec. 12, we thanked our donors and celebrated our 10-year anniversary at a beautiful sit-down dinner at the Tampa Museum of Art sponsored by our board chairman, John Kirtley. During the dinner, we announced that over the past decade we have provided more than 271,000 scholarships to children through the 2012-13 school year. But while these numbers are impressive, what’s more impressive are the stories behind the numbers.

Cheryl Valladares’ daughter, Kristi, was a bright young woman who tragically got involved with drugs. She had two babies, Benjamin and Isaiah, before she died at age 34 of a drug-related illness, leaving Cheryl to raise the two boys alone. Both boys were impacted by their mother’s drug abuse, but it was Isaiah, the youngest, who was born drug addicted and was most affected. He was born cross-eyed and unable to feel pain. And those are just two of his challenges.

Both boys struggled in school until Cheryl was able to enroll them in New Jerusalem Christian Academy in Seffner with the help of Step Up scholarships. Today, the boys are thriving. Cheryl reports that “Benjamin is a very athletic sixth-grader who enjoys soccer and volleyball,” and “Isaiah is a fourth-grader, who is not only holding his own, but also is thriving academically and socially. He even excels at gymnastics at the local YMCA.”

Cheryl told her story at our Dec. 12 celebration and concluded by stating, “I really believe Step Up saved my boys. I couldn’t be more proud of how far they’ve come.”

Cheryl is an amazing human being, and her story is characteristic of our program. All of the parents, grandparents and other caregivers in Step Up are champions for their children, and it’s an honor to partner with them.

Of course, there would be no scholarships without our donors, and we are grateful for their support. We met our 2012 donations cap of $229 million in just seven months, and reached the 2013 $286 million cap in just six months. This level of commitment from our business community is extraordinary; it enables Cheryl Valladares and thousands of other caregivers to provide their children with the education they need and deserve.

The past decade has taught us that when hope meets opportunity magic happens. And nothing is more magical than children realizing their full potential.

Sincerely,

[Signature]
House sponsor Joe Negron said upon passage, “This puts the parents in charge.”

The scholarship amount is set at $3,500 per student, and the program is capped at $50 million.

The Florida Legislature creates the Corporate Tax Credit (CTC) Scholarship Program in 2001, not only a voice in their children’s education, but a real opportunity for a better future. This innovative program allows corporations with certain Florida tax liabilities to redirect a portion of those funds to a scholarship program through a Scholarship Funding Organization (SFO) approved by the Florida Department of Education (DOE) in exchange for a dollar-for-dollar tax credit.

Step Up For Students is currently the only SFO approved by the DOE to redistribute these K-12 scholarship funds. For the 2012-13 school year, approved students could choose between scholarships worth up to $4,335 for private school tuition and fees or up to $500 in transportation costs to attend an out-of-district public school. Since its creation, the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program has awarded more than 271,790 scholarships through the 2012-13 school year. The private school scholarship amount rose to $4,880 for the 2013-14 school year during which more than 60,000 students are expected to attend one of 1,500 participating private schools – and the numbers are expected to climb each year. Florida’s landmark legislation has delivered hope to underprivileged families in not only Florida, but also nationwide, with the program serving as a model for other states.

The work of Step Up For Students is made possible by dedicated corporations, organizations, individuals, community leaders and families who believe in the power of equipping all of Florida’s children with educational options so the future they imagine can become their reality.

**The History and Growth of the Tax Credit Scholarship**

2001 — The Florida Legislature creates the Corporate Tax Credit (CTC) Scholarship Program to give new opportunities to low-income families of students in kindergarten through 12th grade. The scholarship amount is set at $3,500 per student, and the program is capped at $50 million. House sponsor Joe Negron said upon passage, “This puts the parents in charge.”

2002 — The CTC program begins operation. The Collins Center for Public Policy projects the state could save $600 million over the next 10 years as low-income students take advantage of a scholarship that costs the state less than the cost of the student remaining in public school.

2003 — Four CTC groups form the Florida Association of Scholarship Funding Organizations to impose strict financial and educational accountability controls. Florida TaxWatch projects the program could save $478 million over the next eight years.

2005 — The Legislature raises the cap to $88 million to meet growing demand.

2006 — The Legislature, with the support of the Scholarship Funding Organizations, enacts new accountability measures, including the requirement that each student take a nationally recognized norm-referenced test. The scholarship amount is increased to $3,750.

2008 — The Legislature raises the program cap to $118 million, increases the scholarship amount to $3,950 and aims to reach 25,000 students. The law also authorizes up to 3 percent of contributions to be used for administrative purposes. The state Office of Program Policy Analysis & Government Accountability (OPPAGA) reports that the program saved taxpayers $38.9 million in 2007-08.

2009 — The program is expanded to include tax credits for insurance premium tax liability and renamed the Florida Tax Credit (FTC) Scholarship Program. A state-commissioned report concludes that scholarship students in 2007-08 kept pace on standardized test score gains with students of all income levels nationally. Step Up For Students enters into a partnership with Hillsborough County district schools and the Hillsborough teachers union to provide professional training for teachers in private schools.

2010 — The Legislature passes a major expansion with strong bipartisan support, including most Republicans, nearly half the Democrats, and a majority of the black and Hispanic caucuses. The new legislation allows more companies to participate by adding credits for alcoholic beverage excise, direct pay sales and use, and oil and gas severance taxes. It also calls for the scholarship to eventually reach 80 percent of the public school per-student operational level, and allows the program cap to rise by 25 percent any year after 90 percent of the cap is reached.

2011 — Enrollment for the 2010-11 school year increases nearly 20 percent to 34,550 students, with another 8,000 students on a waiting list. An academic progress report finds that Step Up students are modestly outperforming low-income colleagues in public schools and concludes that the improvements “are larger and more statistically significant than in the past year’s results, suggesting that ... students may be gaining ground over time.”

2012 — Demand for scholarships continues to surge. Enrollment for 2011-12 reaches 40,248, with another 13,000 students on a waiting list. In an attempt to reduce the waiting list, the Legislature increases the program cap for 2012-13 to $229 million. In addition, lawmakers removed the requirement that all new scholarship students entering grades K-5 must have attended a Florida public school for the entire previous school year. In the first academic report for Step Up schools, 72 percent kept pace with the national sample, 11 percent exceeded and 17 percent fell short.

2013 — Scholarship enrollment passes the 50,000 mark — ending the 2012-13 school year at 51,075.
2012 operations at a glance

Step Up For Students is committed to making things simpler for applicants, schools and students through regular technological and operational enhancements.

• For the 2012-13 school year, more than 40 percent of Step Up applicants used an enhancement allowing required documents to be uploaded to their applications on the website, which significantly reduced processing time.

• Communication efforts were ramped up to alert families about the application process with text messages and automated phone calls and provided more detailed instructions for applicants after securely logging into the online application. As a result, despite a 20 percent increase in total applicants, the Step Up Contact Center received only 9 percent (8,529) more calls than in the prior year.

• Partnerships with state agencies that serve low-income families gave us the ability to electronically verify household income for 11,132 families, which greatly sped up the scholarship processing time for those applicants.

To go along with Step Up system enhancements in 2012, the Operations Department was restructured and the operations model adjusted to meet changing business needs. The Operations Support Services Team was created to strengthen communications with each of the Step Up partner schools, as well as provide more efficient project management and useful analytics to the Operations Team.

Additionally, enrollment specialists with a background in application processing are now responsible for assisting schools with managing their Step Up student enrollment. The increased personalized contact provides a more well-rounded customer service experience.

OFFICE OF STUDENT LEARNING and SUCCESS PARTNERS

As part of its administrative responsibilities, Step Up For Students is helping strengthen the program’s partnership schools by offering free professional development through Step Up’s Office of Student Learning.

This department’s largest initiative, Success Partners, is a professional development program designed to create closer relationships between parents, teachers and administrators and students.

The premise of the initiative is based on the benefits of strengthening the family-school partnership for the well-being of the child. Schools that work closely with parents often have high student achievement and quality programs. Ten schools in Hillsborough County piloted this program during the 2011-12 school year, 17 more schools came aboard for the 2012-13 school year, and more than 120 are expected to participate throughout the state for the 2013-14 school year.

The capstone of Success Partners is an interactive Learning Compact, designed to give teachers, families and students a way to utilize the Common Core State Standards. With the compact, each party agrees to support one another for the success of the student. These standards are a national initiative of uniform academic benchmarks adopted in 45 states, four territories and the District of Columbia for grades kindergarten through 12 to ensure that students are ready for careers and college.
$23,541.47
average income, family of four. (5.8% above Federal Poverty Guidelines)

54.45%
students from single-parent households

3.8
average household size

FTC Student Racial/Ethnic Enrollment
2012-13 School Year

24.97% White: 12,751
33.11% African American: 16,909
4.87% Other*: 2,488
34.69% Hispanic: 17,718

*Includes students who are American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and multiracial.

Source: FTC June 2013 Quarterly Report

FTC ENROLLMENT GROWTH


Source: FTC Quarterly Reports

50,000
40,000
30,000
20,000
10,000
0

1,209 (2.37%)
Not Reported:

10,549
17,819
15,123

21,493
24,871
28,927

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40,248

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21.8%
annual enrollment growth rate since 2004-05

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Step Up scholarships used through the 2012-13 school year. Another 60,000 expected to use the scholarship for the 2013-14 school year.

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transportation scholarship to an out-of-district public school

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tuition scholarship amount for 2012-13 school year

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Source: FTC June 2013 Quarterly Report
NEW LEGISLATION OPENS THE DOOR WIDER

Two prominent Florida lawmakers, Rep. Richard Corcoran and Sen. Lizbeth Benacquisto, led the effort in 2012 to reduce the waiting list for Tax Credit Scholarships and to open the door to a little wider for elementary school students. The bill was approved with impressive bipartisan support in both the House and Senate by a collective margin of 124-33, and Gov. Rick Scott signed it into law. The new legislation:

- Added an extra $10 million to the statewide tax credit cap in 2012-13, allowing Step Up to add 11,000 more students for the year
- Removed for all new students entering grades K-5 the requirement that they have attended a public school the prior year (all students must always meet the income eligibility threshold)
- Gave scholarship schools the ability to choose and administer the state assessment test, rather than a nationally recognized norm-referenced test
- Gave greater authority to the education commissioner to sanction schools that repeatedly violate state rules

SCHOLARSHIP SCHOOLS POST IMPRESSIVE TEST RESULTS

Standardized test scores released in August 2012 showed that students and schools in the program were holding their own against the rest of the nation. By law, scholarship recipients every year must take a nationally recognized norm-referenced test approved by the state, and must take the well-regarded Stanford Achievement Test. The results for 2010-11 tracked closely with results in prior years, and the researcher issued three key findings:

- Students who chose the scholarship were among the poorest and lowest-performing students from the public schools they left behind.
- These same students achieved gains in reading and math that were the same as all students nationally, regardless of income level.
- These students also achieved the same gains as public school students on free or reduced lunch programs, even though the public school group had higher incomes than the scholarship students and were performing at higher levels in prior years.

The report in 2012 also compared, for the first time, the test score gains for any scholarship school with at least 30 students in grades 3-10 with current and prior-year test scores, which is the same threshold used for public school grades under the No Child Left Behind Act.

- For 2010-11, 58 of the 70 qualifying schools kept pace with or exceeded the national sample.

ANOTHER STATE REPORT FINDS SAVINGS FOR TAXPAYERS

In an impact report issued in March 2012, the state’s Official Revenue Estimating Conference examined the financial impact of the Tax Credit Scholarship program and determined it would save the state $57.9 million in 2012-13 and $199.8 million over a four-year span — money that can be used to help traditional public schools. This finding was consistent with previous government and independent evaluations. The state Office of Program Policy Analysis & Government Accountability issued an in-depth report in 2008 that found a $38.9 million savings in 2007-08.

Two other groups – Florida TaxWatch and the Collins Center for Public Policy – issued similar findings. The savings derive primarily from the fact that the maximum scholarship in 2012-13 represented only 68 percent of the state’s average operational cost per public school student.

NATIONAL PUBLICATIONS SINGLE OUT STEP UP FOR STUDENTS

In a June 2012 report about Tax Credit Scholarship programs across the nation, Education Week singled out Florida for its rigorous and transparent reporting: “Some states have set much more demanding standards for public reporting on finances and participation … notably Florida, which some private-school-choice advocates see as a model. State law requires extensive financial and academic reporting on scholarship-granting organizations, participating schools and students, awards provided, and other information. In addition, Florida’s program, created in 2001 and expanded since then, requires that scholarship students take state-approved norm-referenced tests. … (Step Up For Students founder John) Kirtley said he knows that some backers of private-school choice worry that imposing new government regulations on scholarship programs will restrict innovation and the operation of a free-market system. He doesn’t buy that reasoning. Public confidence wanes when programs are not accountable, he said.”

The Education Week story followed a May 2012 report by The New York Times, which also held up Florida as a positive example. The Times wrote: “In Florida, where the scholarships are strictly controlled to make sure they go to poor families, only corporations are eligible for the tax credits, eliminating the chance of parents donating for their own benefit. Also, all scholarships are handled by one nonprofit organization, and its fees are limited to 3 percent of donations. Florida also permits the scholarships to move with the students if they elect to change schools. David Figlio, a professor at Northwestern University who has studied Florida’s program, said it was an important alternative to public schools for some families. ‘They’re doing it because they’re feeling stuck,’ Dr. Figlio said. ‘Their kids are doing poorly in the classroom, and they don’t know why.’ ”
**Step Up For Students:** Scholarship Funding Organizations, such as Step Up For Students, must be approved by the state Department of Education and are required each year to submit to the Auditor General and the Department of Education an annual financial and compliance audit of its accounts and records conducted by an independent certified public accountant. The audit submitted on Dec. 18, 2012, concluded that the financial statements for Step Up For Students “present fairly in all material respects” the organization’s financial position. It also concluded that Step Up “complied in all material respects” with state statutes and rules.

**Schools:** Any school that receives more than $250,000 in scholarships must file a financial report every year completed by an independent certified public accountant. The CPAs must examine the fitness of general financial procedures and report specifically on such issues as how scholarship money is expended and whether students were enrolled. In 2012, every school that met the $250,000 threshold filed reports by the Sept. 15 deadline.

**Parents Voting with Their Applications**

The number of students on Step Up scholarships soared by roughly 11,000 in 2012-13, to reach an enrollment of 51,075. But that growth was not the only indication that parents think this learning option works for their children. Consistent with an increase in applications, parents gave the schools and program high marks. The most recent independent survey, released by the state in 2010, found that 95.4 percent of participating parents approved of the program. Of that total, 75.1 percent rated their schools as “excellent” and 20.3 percent as “good.”

**Lower Overhead means more revenues go to scholarships.**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Revenue Sources</th>
<th>Operating Expenses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>96.6%</td>
<td>98.4%</td>
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<td>0.8% Tax Credit Scholarship Redirections</td>
<td>0.8% General and Administrative</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2.6% Foundations and other donors</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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Total tax-credit redirections and other revenues grew to $312.9 million in the year ending June 30, 2013. Despite this growth, qualified low-income children remained on the waiting list for scholarships.

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Total tax-credit redirections and other revenues grew to $269.1 million in 2012; 98.4 percent of all expenses were program related.
Step Up For Students’ overhead rate represents management, general and fundraising expenses as a percentage of total revenue. This low rate reflects careful administration and efficiencies achieved through program growth.

97% of every redirected tax credit dollar is put toward funding the scholarships.

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Total tax-credit redirections and other revenues grew to $312.9 million in the year ending June 30, 2013. Despite this growth, qualified low-income children remained on the waiting list for scholarships.
Our Donors Step it up

Step Up For Students wouldn’t exist without the generous giving of our donors nationwide. Since the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program was created in 2001, corporations have redirected more than $1.4 billion of their Florida tax liabilities to Step Up For Students. The organization has funded 271,790 scholarships through the 2012-13 school year, and that number is on track to increase this year to more than 330,000. It is the testimonies of the scholarship students that give donors confidence in their return on investment and solidifies their commitment to the program.

The Florida Legislature has added several sources of tax credit funding to the scholarship program over the years, making it possible for a diverse group of corporations to participate in the program. Companies can participate in the program by redirecting one or more of the following Florida tax liabilities:

• Corporate Income Tax (eligible since 2001, up to 100%)
• Insurance Premium Tax (eligible since 2009, up to 100%)
• Direct Pay Sales and Use Tax (eligible since 2010, up to 100%)
• Alcoholic Beverage Excise Tax (eligible since 2010, up to 90%)
• Oil and/or Gas Severance Tax (eligible since 2010, up to 50%)

As a mechanism to keep up with growing scholarship demand, the program funding cap on tax credit contributions continues to rise each year due to a 25 percent automatic increase if 90 percent of the cap is met the year prior. In 2002, the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program’s cap was $50 million; by 2013, it had grown to more than $286 million. This will fund about 60,000 scholarships for the 2013-14 school year. The program has garnered such strong support that the funds were pledged by corporations in just six months, a program fundraising record. Thanks to the automatic 25 percent increase, the 2014-15 funding cap is more than $357 million, ensuring that Step Up can continue to provide these educational opportunities for even more low-income children in Florida.

As an added benefit to financial corporations that contribute, examiners at bank Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) regulatory agencies have approved dollars transferred to fund scholarships through this program to qualify for positive consideration under the CRA investment test.

Step Up For Students has strong partnerships with many individuals, organizations and foundations that help provide the administrative funds necessary to equip thousands of children with the educational tools for a promising future. This collaborative effort enables the scholarship program to succeed.
Representative Corporate Donors

3M Company (2012, 2013)
ABC Fine Wine and Spirits, Inc. (2012)
Allstate Insurance Company (2012, 2013)
American Integrity Insurance Company of Florida (2012, 2013)
Ark Royal Insurance Company (2013)
AT&T (2012)
BankUnited (2012, 2013)
Bernie Little Distributors, Inc. (2012, 2013)
Brown Distributing Company (2012, 2013)
Burkhartd Sales & Service (2012, 2013)
Capacity Insurance Company (2012, 2013)
Cardinal Health (2013)
Carroll Distributing Company (2012, 2013)
Centennial Bank (2012, 2013)
Cerner Corporation (2013)
Champion Brands, Inc. (2013)
Chubb Group of Insurance Companies (2013)
Citizens First Bank (2012)
City Beverages Orlando (2012, 2013)
Coastal Beverage, Ltd. (2012, 2013)
Cone Distributing (2012, 2013)
Daytona Beverages, LLC (2012, 2013)
Delta National Bank and Trust Company (2013)
Denny’s, Inc. (2013)
DeVry Inc. (2012)
Dicks Sporting Goods (2012, 2013)
Eagle Brands Sales (2013)
EverBank (2012, 2013)
FCCI (2012, 2013)
Florida Crystals Corporation (2013)
Florida Distributing Company (2013)
Florida Doctors Insurance Company (2012, 2013)
Florida East Coast Railway, LLC (2012, 2013)
Florida Family Insurance Company (2012, 2013)
FM Global (2013)
GEICO Companies (2012, 2013)
Gold Coast Beverage Distributors, Inc. (2012, 2013)
Gold Coast Eagle Distributing (2012, 2013)
Gulf Power (2012, 2013)
HCA (2012, 2013)
Health Management Associates Inc. (2013)
Heritage Indemnity Company (2012, 2013)
Heritage Property & Casualty Insurance Company (2013)
Johnson & Johnson (2012)
Johnson Brothers Liquor Co. of Florida, Inc. (2012, 2013)
Kemper Corporation (2012, 2013)
Kforce Inc. (2012, 2013)
Lender Processing Services, Inc. (2012, 2013)
Liberty Mutual Group (2012, 2013)
Lincoln Heritage Life Insurance Company (2012)
Lowes (2012, 2013)
MEDNAX Services, Inc. (2012, 2013)
New York Life Insurance (2012)
Norwegian Cruise Line (2012, 2013)
Pepin Distributing (2012)
Philadelphia Insurance Companies (2012)
Premier Beverage Company (2012, 2013)
Prudential Financial, Inc. (2012)
QBE Insurance Corporation (2012, 2013)
QR Energy, LP (2012)
Raymond James (2012, 2013)
Read Connigo, sponsored by Infinity Auto Insurance (2012, 2013)
Roche Surety & Casualty (2012, 2013)
Rosen Hotels & Resorts (2012, 2013)
Sabadell United Bank (2012, 2013)
Saddle Creek Corporation (2012)
Schneider Electric (2012, 2013)
Seavin, Inc. / Lakeridge Winery & Vineyards and San Sebastian Winery (2012, 2013)
Southern Eagle Distributing, Inc. (2012, 2013)
Southern Wine and Spirits of America, Inc. (2012, 2013)
Stein Mart, Inc. (2012)
Stephens Distributing Company (2013)
Tempur-Pedic North America, LLC (2012)
Tenet Healthcare (2012, 2013)
The Doctors Company (2012)
The Hartford Financial Services Group, Inc. (2013)
The Main Street America Group (2013)
The Progressive Group of Insurance Companies (2012)
Tractor Supply Company (2012, 2013)
Transamerica (2012, 2013)
Tri-Eagle Sales (2013)
Trust Companies of America (2012, 2013)
U.S. Bank National Association (2012)
UnitedHealthcare (2012, 2013)
Universal Health Services, Inc. (2012, 2013)
Universal Insurance Company of North America (2013)
Urban Outfitters, Anthropologie, and Free People (2013)
Uretek Holdings, Inc. (2012, 2013)
W.S. Badcock Corporation (2012, 2013)
Waste Management (2012, 2013)
Wayne Densch, Inc. (2012, 2013)
WellCare Health Plans (2013)
Westcor Land Title Insurance Company (2012, 2013)
Westfield Insurance (2012, 2013)
Winn-Dixie Stores, Inc. (2012, 2013)
Wright National Flood Insurance Company (2012)
Wyndham Vacation Ownership (2012, 2013)
YUM! Brands (2012, 2013)

Foundations and Other Donors

Armstrong Foundation (2012, 2013)
Bic Graphic USA (2013)
Dick & Betsy DeVos Foundation (2012)
Todd Hill (2013)
Nancy Lawton (2013)
Publix Super Markets Charities (2012, 2013)
Linda Radtke (2013)
Walton Family Foundation (2012, 2013)

Participating cap year(s) indicated in parentheses.
10-YEAR ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

Tampa Museum of Art, Tampa

Step Up For Students supporters gathered Dec. 12, 2012, at the Tampa Museum of Art to celebrate a decade of true parental choice in Florida, which has given tens of thousands of low-income families the means to select the school that best fits their K-12 students’ needs.

Founder and Chairman John Kirtley sponsored the dinner and was joined by Florida Gov. Rick Scott, Florida House Speaker Will Weatherford, other legislators, corporate donors, scholarship recipients and their families, as well as other community supporters, to celebrate a decade of school choice, the program’s growth, and to ponder the future.

Since the Florida Legislature created the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program in 2001, at Kirtley’s and its supporters’ urging, the program has grown both in support and in numbers.

“I first saw the power of this idea in 1998, when our privately funded scholarship program here in Tampa Bay received 12,000 applications from low-income parents for just 700 scholarships,” Kirtley said during the dinner event. “The power of this idea brings people great distances philosophically. In seven years, we went from having no members of the Legislative Black Caucus supporting the program, to a majority.”

The governor urged others to continue supporting the program and vowed he would not only do the same, but take it a step further. “My goal is – a lot of things that you’ve started, to make sure that we continue them – when I finish this job, every student, every child in this state has a choice. That would be a great day.”

Scott also said leaders nationwide are watching what Florida has done in education. “What John started and what you’re continuing is forcing the rest of the country to change because they see how well Florida is doing,” he said, pointing out recent test scores placing Florida’s fourth-grade students on top of the list for international reading scores.

It’s those types of successes Step Up leaders strive for in the scholarship students.

Step Up For Students President Doug Tuthill told the crowd of approximately 150 guests that the people involved in the organization are passionate about providing equal opportunity to all Florida students. He also said the foundation of success is for kindergarten through 12th-grade students to have true school choice. That’s what Step Up works toward, he said.

“And in the past 10 years we have provided more than 271,000 scholarships to Florida’s children. That represents over $1.1 billion in scholarships,” Tuthill said. “What that really represents is the merger of hope and opportunity because what we have found over the years is that when you bring hope and opportunity together, that magic happens.”

Tuthill recalled a meeting Step Up leaders had two years ago with Weatherford. “We talked about our dreams, what we’d like to see and what he’d like to accomplish as the speaker, and he said, ‘You know, I would be so thrilled if at the end of my two years as speaker we could get 50,000 kids on scholarship.’ And tonight I have a special announcement for Speaker Weatherford, which is,” Tuthill said, and then he paused. He walked over and removed a black drape off a large poster set on an easel. The poster read: “Department of Education reports 2012-13 Tax Credit Scholarship enrollment 50,821.” Tuthill bowed and applause erupted. “Mission accomplished, sir,” Tuthill said, looking toward Weatherford, who was sworn in as speaker in November 2012. “50,821.”
In celebration of their support of Step Up For Students, representatives from U.S. Bank National Association visited Heritage Preparatory School in Orlando in February 2012 to teach approximately 50 high school students about money management.

Peter Fowler, vice president of corporate trust services for U.S. Bank, provided a practical financial overview to the students and explained how to effectively track their spending and savings. In an effort to prepare his audience for financial independence, Fowler provided real-world scenarios to help them understand how to balance a bank account. He spoke about managing a checking account, ATM card and credit card, and when to use which form of currency.

U.S. Bank contributed $350,000 to Step Up in 2011, which provided funding for 85 scholarships to students in Miami-Dade, Broward, Orange and Duval counties. In addition to the financial literacy event in Orlando, U.S. Bank representatives also visited participating schools in the other counties to connect with the students they support through the scholarship program. The schools were Dr. John A. McKinney Christian Academy in Miami, Abundant Life Christian Academy in Margate and the Foundation Academy in Jacksonville. U.S. Bank also contributed $500,000 in 2012.

Nearly 150 students at Temple Christian Academy in Jacksonville had the opportunity in March 2012 to roll up their sleeves and try out their green thumbs during the groundbreaking ceremony for the school’s garden. Sponsored by BJ’s Wholesale Club, the event featured a ribbon-cutting ceremony and a student testimony from scholarship recipient Curtis Williams, a senior at the time.

“It is exciting to be able to join two of our passions, education and our Farm to Club initiative, in an effort to give back to the communities that we serve,” said Archie Hogue, BJ’s Wholesale Club regional manager.

BJ’s launched the Farm to Club initiative in select regions. The initiative promotes locally sourced produce by partnering with farms near its club locations. BJ’s Wholesale Club hosted the event to teach the value of eating locally grown produce whenever possible.

The company first partnered with Step Up in 2009 and has since contributed more than $1.3 million, funding 320 scholarships.

The sixth-grade class at Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic School in Dunedin had some very special guests in its third period math class in April 2012. Attorney General Pam Bondi and her staff and Marshall Criser III, president of AT&T Florida, visited Our Lady of Lourdes for a hands-on cyber safety event.

The event, designed to help students protect their online information, came at the right time. Each sixth-grade student at Our Lady of Lourdes received an Apple iPad at the beginning of the school year as part of a pilot program, and students often use the Internet to complete assignments.

AT&T, a founding donor of the Step Up For Students Program, offered the event as part of its continued commitment to education and keeping children safe online. The Attorney General’s Office joined forces with AT&T to focus on cyber safety education, an issue that both parties consider a top priority.

AT&T first partnered with Step Up in 2002 and has contributed $19.2 million, providing for nearly 4,700 scholarships since then.
KEMPER CORPORATION

Palmetto

Kindergarten and first-grade students from Manatee Learning Academy in Bradenton spent the better part of a May 2012 morning hugging puppies.

The young students had the opportunity to take a field trip to the Southeastern Guide Dogs’ campus in Palmetto thanks to Kemper Corporation, a financial services company that emphasizes the importance of giving back to the community. Employees from Kemper’s Tampa office joined approximately 30 Manatee Learning Academy students along with their teachers and chaperones for the event. The group took a tour of the Southeastern Guide Dogs’ 23-acre campus, and then had the opportunity to take part in its “Puppy Hugging” activity, which is designed to help socialize the puppies for service later on in life. Kemper offered the event to the students at Manatee Learning Academy as a way to encourage them to establish an interest in volunteering.

“At Kemper Corporation, we see the value in building the communities where we do business by giving back. Volunteering is a part of our company culture, and we believe it benefits not only the community, but our employees as well,” said Mark Williams, Tampa office district manager for United Insurance Co., a Kemper Corporation Home Service Company.

Kemper first partnered with Step Up in 2012 and renewed its support in 2013, providing 42 scholarships for students.

PREMIER BEVERAGE COMPANY

Tampa

On a Thursday night in May 2012, approximately 50 guests arrived at Premier Beverage Company’s state-of-the-art facility in Tampa for an event celebrating the company’s commitment to sustainability. Premier’s Tampa facility, one of the largest LEED-eligible, or “green,” projects in Florida, is located on a nature preserve and promotes energy savings, water efficiency, indoor environmental quality and a reduction of carbon dioxide emissions. The distribution...
center, featuring a reflective white TPO roof system, stormwater collection locations for irrigation and a water-cooled, chilled-water HVAC system, was not the only center of attention at the event, however. Premier hosted the event to celebrate its nearly $40 million in contributions to Step Up For Students, which it first joined as a partner in 2011.

“Our company recognizes that today’s students are tomorrow’s business and political leaders, so it is in our best interest, and theirs, to help them find the educational opportunities they need to succeed,” said Bob Drinon, president and CEO of Premier Beverage Company. “We are thrilled to announce our contribution, and we look forward to hearing all of the success stories that will result from it.”

At the event, guests heard from Step Up and Premier representatives and a local scholarship recipient’s mother, toured the distribution facility, and enjoyed hors d’oeuvres made with organic ingredients from a Tampa restaurant along with new Premier organic wine and spirits products.

In 2013, Premier once again pledged $25 million in support of the SUFS program and has now funded more than 14,000 scholarships.

**INFINITY / READ CONMIGO**

**Miami**

Step Up For Students and Infinity Insurance co-hosted a back-to-school event at Our Lady of the Holy Rosary Catholic School in Miami to announce Infinity Insurance’s 2012 contribution of $1.5 million to the scholarship program.

At the event, families enjoyed a meal together and a presentation about Infinity Insurance’s Read Conmigo bilingual literacy program. At the center of the program is a free subscription delivering original award-winning bilingual children’s books and learning activities. Teachers from Our Lady of the Holy Rosary demonstrated how parents could read with their children at home in English and in Spanish, using books provided by Read Conmigo.

“Infinity Insurance is fully committed to supporting the education of our youth, which is why we started the Read Conmigo program,” said Greg Fasking, vice president of consumer marketing for Infinity Auto Insurance. “We are very pleased to extend our support of Step Up For Students another year and to increase our contribution by 50 percent.”

**DAYTONA BEVERAGES, LLC**

**Daytona Beach**

In September 2012, John Ufheil, a partner at Daytona Beverages, visited the Basilica School of St. Paul and met with a family whose two sons attend the school with help from Step Up scholarships.

“We are pleased that our corporate contributions are helping so many families in need,” said Kevin Bowler, president of Daytona Beverages, LLC. “We are proud to support a program that is helping to strengthen our community by empowering families to choose the best educational option for their children.”

Since joining Step Up as a corporate partner in 2010, Daytona Beverages’ contributions have funded more than 2,470 scholarships.

**CENTENNIAL BANK**

**Tallahassee**

Elementary school students at Seven Hills Academy in Tallahassee had a unique visitor at their assembly in September 2012. “Penny,” the mascot of Centennial Bank, along with representatives from the financial institution, joined the students to present a $1 million contribution to Step Up For Students.

“We are proud that this contribution will impact our community in a positive way by helping more than 220 students learn in the academic environment that fits their unique needs,” said Donnie Gay, market president, North Florida – central region.
KEMPER CORPORATION
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Representatives from GEICO Companies visited St. Peter Claver Catholic School in Tampa in October 2012 to deliver the news that the company contributed $2 million in 2012 to Step Up. This marked the third year of GEICO’s support.

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The elementary students at St. Peter Claver enjoyed meeting the GEICO Gecko and thanking the representatives.

GEICO Companies recommitted to Step Up in 2013 with another $2 million contribution, which will fund 397 scholarships.

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Executives from Southern Wine & Spirits of America Inc. visited La Progresiva Presbyterian School in Miami in November 2012 to present a check for its $20 million tax redirection to Step Up For Students.

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“Southern Wine & Spirits enthusiastically supports Step Up For Students in its mission of providing Florida students with access to the education that best addresses their individual needs,” said Wayne Chaplin.

During the event, the third-grade students presented posters and signs displaying their thanks for Southern’s contribution, which provided nearly 4,500 scholarships during the 2012-13 school year.

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J.J. TAYLOR DISTRIBUTING FLORIDA, INC.

Jefferson

At a “going green” event in May 2013 at New Jerusalem Christian Academy in Seffner, about 140 students dressed in green anxiously filed into the assembly hall to hear the results of the school’s recycling competition. Before the results were revealed, the kindergarten through eighth-grade students learned about Step Up For Students, school choice and the importance of reducing their ecological footprints from Speaker of the Florida House of Representatives Will Weatherford, Step Up For Students Chairman John Kirtley and representatives from J.J. Taylor Distributing.

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As a part of its partnership with Step Up For Students, J.J. Taylor Distributing sponsored the event at New Jerusalem to encourage students to adopt sustainable habits like recycling and to join their company in “going green.” For its part, J.J. Taylor Distributing installed a new natural gas fueling station at its Tampa facility in January 2013 and converted 43 delivery vehicles to compressed natural gas. At the event, the first grade won the recycling competition, and enjoyed a cupcake party. Three middle school students were also chosen as winners of the extra-credit essay and art project, and were given gift cards provided by J.J. Taylor, and enjoyed a ride in one of the company’s natural gas trucks. Doris Aybar, the student speaker, took first prize.

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The best way to realize the impact of the Step Up For Students Scholarship Program is to hear the stories directly from the families we serve. Often candid, they are tales of tribulation and tears, and show how a scholarship can lead to triumph.

While the families’ stories are different, they share a common theme: The families needed an opportunity to better educate their children and improve their quality of life now and forever. For one boy, that meant catching up two reading grade levels in six months because a teacher at a smaller school had time to work with him and recognized the challenges his dyslexia posed. For a young girl, when her daddy died and the rest of her world started to fall apart, that meant her school community wrapped its collective arms around her a little tighter and kept a watchful eye on her, even at her home. For a sweet kindergartener being raised by her great-grandmother, it meant the campus minister stepping in at the Father-Daughter Dance so she would never have to skip a milestone beat. And for yet another scholar, it meant trying several private schools before finding the perfect fit where she was able to focus both academically and artistically and dance her way into a prestigious performing arts high school.

Their stories are powerful. And here we share a few more of them, so you can see through the eyes of our scholars and their families what a difference Step Up For Students and our donors are making throughout Florida.

TALLAVANA CHRISTIAN SCHOOL
Havana, Florida

In the first grade, Jeremiah Mcgriff was known at his school, Tallavana Christian School, as a smart and neatly dressed little boy with a bright future – and some serious basketball skills. Statistically speaking, however, Jeremiah didn’t come into the world with many advantages. Born prematurely at just over 2 pounds, Jeremiah was the same length as a 20-ounce soda bottle at birth.

But both he and his mother, Helean Curry, are too determined to be bothered by statistics. Helean remembers the operating room at Shands Hospital in Gainesville where Jeremiah was born. She remembers seeing about 10 doctors in the corner waiting to operate on her, as a diagnosis of aplastic anemia and resulting preeclampsia necessitated a high-risk delivery at just seven months. But when she saw her newborn son wheeled out on a hospital bassinet instead of an incubator, she knew everything was OK. He was healthy, but needed to gain weight.

Jeremiah is now in the normal weight range for boys his age, tipping the scales at 52 pounds. The only remaining sign of his premature birth is his asthma, which he manages with an inhaler.

His mother grew up with 12 siblings in a four-bedroom “shotgun house” on a farm in Havana, Fla., just outside of Tallahassee. While she learned a lot of life skills on the farm, like how to be resourceful, she wanted more for her two children. Helean made a promise to herself to never return to the farm lifestyle once she left, and has kept that promise.

Once she graduated high school, Helean studied business at Lively Community College in Tallahassee and worked for a few different companies, including a retail store and an assisted living facility. She always found herself rising to the top and managing others, but her career was put on hold when she was diagnosed with aplastic anemia after the birth of her daughter, Celszie, and had to stop working. As a single mother on disability, she was thankful to find out that the Step Up For Students Scholarship Program could help send her children to a school where they could receive one-on-one attention from their teachers and benefit from a smaller school environment.

She sent Celszie to Tallavana Christian School in Havana from sixth through 12th grade, where she thrived. Celszie was a cheerleader in high school, an active member of the school’s praise team, was in the garden club and a proud member of the Beta Honor Society. Celszie, now 20, graduated in May 2011 and is studying graphic design at Tallahassee Community College.
Jeremiah, 7, makes A’s on his report cards and loves to learn, according to Helean. She boasts that Jeremiah not once made less than a perfect score on his Friday spelling tests in first grade and is intrigued by other languages.

For Jeremiah, the learning doesn’t stop once he leaves school. He and his mother, who is taking online classes of her own at Tallahassee Community College, study spelling by using flash cards, and he can often be found practicing his handwriting in extra notebooks he brings home from school. “He loves school so much I had to go out and get a child’s chalkboard,” Helean said. “When school’s out, we’re still in school. We play school together.”

Helean doesn’t take her son’s scholarship for granted. She believes if someone is helping her pay tuition, she’s not going to let that money go to waste.

Without the scholarship Jeremiah would not have been able to attend Tallavana Christian, where Helean said he benefited from smaller classes and more attention from the teachers. While she still had to come up with the gap of about $480 between the scholarship amount and the school’s tuition, Helean said he can’t go wrong with private school.

Jeremiah’s first-grade class learned addition and cursive, something she said she didn’t learn until she was much older.

“Jeremiah is an excellent speller and is definitely a leader in the classroom,” said Jeremiah’s first-grade teacher, Melanie Herndon. “Everyone just loves him, and he has this huge laugh. Sometimes I wonder how such a big laugh is coming from such a tiny person.”

It isn’t just academics that keep Jeremiah moving forward; his other love is basketball. At the school’s spirit week in the spring of 2013, Jeremiah won the elementary basketball shooting competition.

“He told me that it’s okay to come in second or third place in basketball, but Jeremiah doesn’t like to lose,” Helean said. His perfectionist attitude seems to flow into other aspects of his life, too. Even when he’s playing at home with building blocks, he takes the time to carefully line up the pieces and make sure they’re measured just right.

Helean isn’t sure yet what all these attributes will amount to in Jeremiah’s future, but she is hopeful he will continue to excel academically and athletically at his new school as well. Over the summer, Helean enrolled Jeremiah in Metropolitan Christian Academy of the Arts, which is closer to their home, and it’s a place he can also explore another one of his loves: drums.

**About Tallavana Christian School**

Located in Havana, Fla., Tallavana Christian School educates students from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. The school’s motto is “Preparing Students for Success in Life,” and it has traditional private school offerings, such as small class sizes and a Christian background, but also has a growing athletics program including softball, baseball, girls’ and boys’ basketball and girls’ volleyball. Tuition for the 2012-13 school year was $4,500 and the school administers the Stanford Achievement Test. Of its 210 students in the 2012-13 school year, 95 attended Tallavana Christian School with help from the Step Up For Students Scholarship Program.

**Citrus Heights Academy**

Clermont

Patricia Maniti is one of those children who can be described as 7-going-on-27. The second-grade student at Citrus Heights Academy in Clermont, Fla., is very diligent in her schoolwork and enjoys learning and being around the older students and adults at her school. She is much smaller in size than other students her age, but has a big spirit that more than makes up for her small stature.

“She is like a little adult,” her mother Jerilee said with a smile. “People come up to me all the time and comment on how polite she is and compliment me on a job well done, but I always tell them it isn’t all my doing.”

Jerilee attributes some of her daughter’s success to her school and teachers, particularly her teacher Amy Hutton. Patricia, who consistently makes the school’s A Honor Roll, loves school so much that she cries when she has to go on break for the holidays. She likes to study science and enjoys being out in nature and says math is her favorite because it comes easily to her.
But life has been far from easy for Patricia and her family. Patricia became very ill when she was 5, and she had to visit many specialists before they determined that she had a severe peanut allergy, celiac disease and asthma. “It’s really hard to figure out how to adjust,” said Jerilee. “Finding food that is gluten-free and does not contain peanuts is difficult, and her medicine and hospital bills became very expensive.”

Jerilee and her husband, Maledean, struggle to make ends meet. They live with his parents in a mobile home on a small farm in Clermont, outside of Orlando, but the crops they were hoping would grow haven’t been successful. About two years ago, Jerilee lost her job at a restaurant nearby and has since had a baby boy, Kenji.

When the family was trying to figure out how to balance Patricia’s health needs with other household expenses, school administrators donated food from the school kitchen. At the time, the family still owed Citrus Heights about $375 in tuition to make up for what the scholarship didn’t cover. The school worked with her and told her to focus on taking care of Patricia, Jerilee said. “That’s how much they’ve helped us. Finding this school and this scholarship has truly been a blessing. I don’t think we would have had the same treatment anywhere else.”

Citrus Heights Principal Tammy Lane would do anything to help this family. “They are such a hard-working family, and they would give you anything they had, without hesitation,” she said. “Even when Patricia was going through all of her health issues, Jerilee was so positive, and in any situation, she just sees the blessings. Knowing a family like that, I had to do anything I could to help.”

Patricia is better now, and Lane said she’s a student everyone knows and loves. The “school-house” environment, which Lane likens to that of a home-school, seems to be a great fit for Patricia.

“She is doing great. She is so smart and she really loves it there,” Jerilee said. “My husband and I are so thankful that we have this opportunity to send her to Citrus Heights, because we wouldn’t be able to provide her with this education on our own.”

When he’s old enough, they plan to enroll Kenji at Citrus Heights Academy, too. “If it wasn’t for the scholarship and the companies who donate, my daughter wouldn’t be happy in a way that I can’t provide for her,” Jerilee said.

**About CITRUS HEIGHTS ACADEMY**

A ministry of Citrus Heights Church of the Nazarene, Citrus Heights Academy opened its doors in 2000. With just 62 students total, 12 on the Step Up For Students Scholarship Program in the 2012-13 school year, the school administrators and teachers take pride in the small one room “school-house” environment. They have an emphasis on drama and the arts as well as time to work one-on-one with the students. The $4,600 tuition for the 2012-13 school year was competitive compared to other private schools in the area, and the school administers the Stanford Achievement Test each year to track students’ progress.

**BREVARD PRIVATE ACADEMY**

**Merritt Island**

It’s safe to say that Brevard Private Academy’s graduation day 2013 was considerably more exciting for proud mother Kate Brown — probably four times more than for most of the graduates’ families.

Certainly, graduation is a happy moment for any mother, but imagine, as the mother of quadruplets, Kate’s pride when she learned her three identical sons were named co-valedictorians. All graduated with a 4.0 grade-point average. Two of the young men, Chris and Eric, also received their associate degrees from Brevard Community College where they were dually enrolled while in high school. And Josh isn’t many college credits behind and plans to finish his degree.
On June 1, Kate watched as three of her four children received their diplomas and Josh’s military recruiter accepted his diploma on his behalf and spoke about his sacrifice, missing his own graduation to step up for his country.

“Pretty amazing. I have to say, I could not be prouder,” said Kate, choked up. Even Kate’s only daughter Allison’s graduation was an extra special moment because if she hadn’t transferred to Brevard Private Academy (BPA), she might not have her diploma now. But she did get to move the tassel from right to left during the ceremony because she moved to the school with her brothers before it was too late.

“Before going back to Brevard Private Academy, she was falling behind on credits. School for her was a social event,” Kate said. “I don’t know if she would have graduated if she was still in the other school.”

The 18 years went by so quickly for Kate. Twenty-three weeks into her pregnancy, Kate, who didn’t have fertility treatments, checked into the hospital and didn’t check out until more than 10 weeks later after she gave birth by cesarean section on April 1, 1995.

Allison came first, weighing in at 4½ pounds. Eric arrived next, weighing 3 pounds, 1 ounce. Then it was Josh, who was the smallest at 2 pounds, 12 ounces. And finally Chris made his entrance at 4 pounds, 1 ounce. “They were all born really healthy,” Kate said. The Yother quadruplets came home at different times after reaching healthy weights. “It seems like forever ago,” Kate said.

Since then, Kate and the quads’ father, Mike Yother, divorced and she has remarried. And while the four siblings have developed their own personalities, they have always remained close. The four of them started off in neighborhood schools, but after Kate learned about Brevard Private Academy and Step Up For Students, three of the four enrolled at the seventh through 12th grade school by their freshman year. While two of them drifted back to their neighborhood high school, in the end, all four knew they should finish their high school journey together at BPA. And they finished strong.

“With the one-on-one attention, they really learned and excelled,” Kate said.

Principal Cheree Shaykhain was equally impressed with the quadruplets, saying they each were a standout in their own way. “They exceeded our expectations with excellent grade-point averages and are leading successful lives for which they are admired,” said Shaykhain. “We appreciate all they do at BPA. It is rare to find young adults who have good grades, are full-time dual enrolled, work, and still make time to tutor other students and help with community service and school functions. What great students.”

Each of the Yother siblings realizes the value of their high school education. “Without Step Up and without Brevard Private Academy’s one-on-one help, I would probably be forgotten about and left behind in a school,” Chris said. “At BPA there are just good teachers, and the dual enrollment got me on track to where I wanted to be academically.” For his sister, her return to the academy was an academic lifesaver. “I knew I would do much better at BPA. It’s more hands-on there,” Allison said. “The teachers really work around the students’ needs.”

While the Yothers shared positive experiences together at school, they now have chosen their own paths and since shortly after graduation have been experiencing life apart. Chris is continuing his education at the University of Central Florida and plans to pursue a master’s degree in history and political science. He aspires to one day teach, and perhaps work in the foreign policy arena. His siblings chose the military. Josh joined the U.S. Marine Corps, while Eric and Allison enlisted in the U.S. Navy. All say they eventually want to continue their education.

For Josh, who also hopes to teach one day, the decision to go into the Marines came easily because he has been fascinated by the military since he was a child. “I thought it would be cool to be part of it,” he said.

Kate has been adjusting to life without them, and of course, like all moms, worries a bit, but knows things will turn out well for her children. “I’m really proud of them for making these individual decisions,” said Kate. “This will be their time to themselves. They don’t have to tell anyone they are a quad.”

All four of the siblings are torn about being apart, but are confident about the future. “I think we’re all going in good directions,” said Eric. “But I feel good knowing one day we’ll be together again.” In fact, the quads have a shared goal, after they’ve had some of their own life experiences and are ready to settle down: They plan to live in the same town and raise their families together.

**about BREVARD PRIVATE ACADEMY**

Brevard Private Academy serves students in grades 7-12. For the 2012-13 school year, 86 of 106 students were Step Up scholars. Tuition for the year was $5,500. The school uses the TerraNova CAT/6 to measure academic success.
Tonya Fers could no longer take the verbal and sporadic physical abuse that came from the man she loved, the father of all five of her children. She knew it was not the environment in which to raise her babies, and while distressed and overwhelmed, she looked for the courage and the means to find a way out.

It took longer than she hoped.

She had met and fallen in love with her then seemingly mature boyfriend in 1994, but he increasingly turned to alcohol and began womanizing, and grew possessive when he wanted to regain control. Eventually, all traces of the man who once had embodied the romance that she so desired were gone. Tonya wondered what life would be like without him, but fear of raising her children alone paralyzed her.

One spring afternoon, sitting in the pastor’s office at Classical Christian School for the Arts (CCSA) in Pinellas Park, Tonya recalled the circumstances that brought her from Virginia to Florida.

“I didn’t know how the children and I would survive without him,” Tonya said. “I couldn’t afford the high price of day care for more than one child, and I had to work.”

It wasn’t that he contributed much financially, she said, or that he was the best father, but she knew at the very least that he could watch the children while she provided for the family.

When she was working as a property manager in Hopewell, Va., she often thought about her grandparents’ stories of their travels to Florida when she was younger and thought maybe one day this is where she could start a new life. There were many times through the years when she would contemplate leaving, but thoughts of her children without a father weighed heavily on her. Her boyfriend was meaner sober than when he was in an intoxicated state, but the alcohol made him wicked in other ways, she said. Whenever he got an inkling she wanted to leave him, he would try to pit the children against her and act like he was their best friend with promises of gifts the couple couldn’t afford.

Then Tonya lost her job after refusing to transfer and manage a different property in an area she felt was unsafe. It turned out to be a blessing in disguise, she said. She had already applied for affordable housing in Fort Myers, Fla., in case she got the push to leave her boyfriend.

“When I finally realized that nothing that I could do or say would change him, that’s when I was ready,” Tonya recalled.

Once she was let go from her job, she packed the family’s bags and headed south to what was supposed to be her new life with her children. The catch to the plan – and it was a big one – was that her boyfriend followed her to Florida.

For a while, she said, nothing much changed except she now lived in Fort Myers. She applied for housing in Pinellas County, near where she wanted to attend school for fashion design; she found employment there and again picked up her family and moved. All the while, her boyfriend was going back and forth from Florida to Virginia, never letting Tonya and the children feel settled. Then when she got to Pinellas, she was told there had been a mistake and an apartment wasn’t available. For three months, she and the children lived in a homeless shelter. She worked while the children went to a county school, and again her children’s father returned and they moved into a series of hotels and apartments.

Finally in 2009, she garnered the strength to get him out of their lives for good. She wanted her children to have a better life.

“The way I got that strength is that God opened my eyes and gave me the ability to see,” Tonya said.

She started by summoning family from the north for support, and was granted a domestic-violence injunction from the courts. After the court ruled that the children’s father could only see them on supervised visits, he told a court magistrate he would rather not see
them at all. Tonya said he has seen them a couple of times, showing up when the family was shopping for groceries, for example. Once he followed the family in a shopping center parking lot and started pounding on the windshield after Tonya and the children had hurried inside their van. But for the most part he has stayed out of their lives, and for the first time in years, Tonya is more at peace. She has to be, she said, for her children.

“I felt like a million bucks once he was gone,” she said.

Through it all, Tonya has always been on top of her children’s education, and they have gone to various schools since moving to Florida. At times, some of the children have mildly acted out, and some have had difficulty in school. But since finding them the perfect fit at Classical Christian for the 2010-11 school year, with help from the Step Up program, her children have settled down into the open arms of their own school and church family, and Tonya finally feels settled as well.

“We are blessed to have the Fers-Pegram family enrolled at our school,” said Kim Merrigan, the school’s executive director. “The children demonstrate the Christian ethics we teach, while also excelling academically. As a parent, Ms. Fers participates not only in her own children’s education, but volunteers to help other students who may be struggling.”

Tonya’s children, who are in first through seventh grades, are all doing well and very involved in school, including athletics and music, and the girls enjoy dance classes. Anyone who knows them says they are beautiful inside and out. Tonya credits a big part of that to the school.

“I really like CCSA because it’s so family-oriented and close-knit,” she said. “These teachers don’t just come here to teach and go home and forget about it. I feel like they really care about my children and their learning.”

**about CLASSICAL CHRISTIAN SCHOOL FOR THE ARTS**

Classical Christian School for the Arts is a K-8 school that focuses on both visual and performance arts, in addition to traditional academics in a Christian environment. For the 2012-13 school year, 51 students out of 118 were Step Up scholars. Tuition for the year was $5,900 to $6,500, depending on grade level. The school uses the Stanford 10 test to measure academic success.
Holy Family Catholic School
Jacksonville

Any old red carpet simply wouldn’t do. So in the fall of 2012, Holy Family Catholic School rolled out a specially designed one that a family donated after the school received the prestigious National Blue Ribbon Award. It’s emblazoned with the National Blue Ribbon School seal, and it’s the first thing people see when they walk into the school lobby. There’s no doubt this school community is proud of its achievement.

The U.S. Department of Education recognizes the nation’s top-performing public and private schools annually, and in 2012, this K-8 private school in Jacksonville was one of 269 schools nationwide to receive the distinction. In fact, nine schools in Florida received the award, and only two of those were private schools. The other private school, Westlake Christian School in Palm Harbor, is also a Step Up for Students participating school.

“For selfish reasons as a principal, this is the type of thing you dream about. We all know we are one of the youngest schools in the U.S. to receive this award,” said Rosemary Nowotny, who retired as principal of the school in June after nearly eight years. “It doesn’t mean we’ve won anything, it’s just that we get to lead the way.”

The award came as the school was celebrating a decade in existence with a special mantra of “10 Years of Excellent Catholic Education.” Founded in 2002, the school opened its doors with 177 pre-K through fifth-grade students, but has grown to include students through the eighth grade. The school was born out of the Holy Family Catholic Church community, which raised nearly half of the $4.5 million construction costs in only three months.

At Holy Family, traditional classroom learning is enhanced by the school’s use of technology, while teachers and administrators and other staff promote creative thinking. Extracurricular activities, such as Chess Club, a Math Olympiads Team, Book Club, the Brain Brawl team, 4-H Club and school drum line (Nowotny’s creation), all add to the school’s excellent offerings. Of course, athletics like cheerleading, basketball and soccer — to name a few — complement the overall educational experience at Holy Family. Christian principles, naturally, are an integral part of student life.

Judy Steinmeyer, a professional violinist, has been teaching music for two years at Holy Family and loves sharing that passion, especially knowing it will help her students in other areas. “I want them to come out of music not only with a new understanding of music itself, but seeing how it helps them in math, science, studying, reading and many other subjects,” Steinmeyer said, adding that her students seem to appreciate her teachings. “You get a lot of hugs and smiles. It is humbling for me to know that everything I do and say will affect nearly 420 students every week at Holy Family.” Steinmeyer also noted that she really enjoys working with an administration that supports the arts.

Nowotny, a former public school teacher and administrator, said that supporting the arts has been very important at Holy Family. “It’s important to me that they have a well-rounded education,” said Nowotny. She added that being named a National Blue Ribbon School does not mean that students and staff of Holy Family can now sit back and just enjoy the distinction. It means quite the opposite, she said. “We have to work even harder.”

About Holy Family

The K-8 school has 20 classrooms and 50 staff members. For the 2012-13 school year, 445 students were enrolled, including 24 Step Up scholars. Tuition for the 2012-13 year was $4,360 for Holy Family Catholic Church parishioners, $5,800 for out-of-parish students and $7,200 for non-Catholics. The school is accredited by the Florida Catholic Conference and measures academic success in all students in second through eighth grades using the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, and the Cognitive Abilities Test in second and fifth grades.

Suncoast Waldorf School
Palm Harbor

There’s something calming from the moment you arrive on the campus of Suncoast Waldorf School, and that’s even before walking through the school’s doors. It is set on busy Curlew Road in Palm Harbor, but the beautiful oak-tree-filled property takes you in and makes you forget the traffic just yards away.

The back of the property, called “the meadow,” is where the older children play at least twice daily. (The younger children have their own fenced-in play space.) In the meadow, there isn’t a play set or any brightly colored manufactured toys, just a rope swing or two. The students create their own play with logs, rocks and other natural things. Imagination is not only encouraged, it’s expected. An added positive aspect of such a practice is how in-tune with nature Waldorf students become, and how much they learn to appreciate it, their teachers say.
Founded in 1919 by Australian philosopher Rudolf Steiner, Waldorf schools take a holistic approach to educating children. According to Rudolf Steiner College, it “balances artistic, academic and practical work educating the whole child, hand and heart as well as mind.”

While there are hundreds of Waldorf schools worldwide, and about 150 in the United States and Canada, there are only a handful in Florida.

Inside Suncoast Waldorf School, the two classroom buildings are as soothing as the outdoor space, especially in the younger-level areas. For the most part, natural light illuminates the rooms. The kindergarten classroom has warm pastels, and as the grade levels progress, the colors brighten a bit, to go along with a child’s mind awakening during their development, explained Barbara Bedingfield, the school’s director and a founder. “One of the very unique things in Waldorf education is that it’s very developmental oriented in when we teach and how we teach,” she said.

The teachers here, Bedingfield said, have more freedom in the classroom than most educators in traditional classrooms. “The wonderful thing about teaching at a Waldorf school is the teachers aren’t given a textbook,” she said. “They gather the information they are going to be creatively teaching. They create the entire lesson. That is what we call the ‘art of teaching.’”

Unlike traditional schools of today, Waldorf kindergarteners don’t learn the alphabet or practice writing their names; that begins in first grade. Instead, their curriculum centers around cultivating creativity. “It’s what kindergarteners are supposed to be,” Bedingfield said, walking around a kindergarten classroom and pointing out wooden toys, and fabrics that could be used for dress up, or a number of imaginative activities. The youngsters even learn finger knitting and basic needle stitching. “They should be playing and using their imaginations,” Bedingfield said.

The other difference visitors will notice is that chalkboards remain in place of SMART boards, and a computer can’t be found anywhere except for in the school offices. In fact, there’s no push or use of technology in Waldorf schools. “They need basic skills before they learn the computer,” Bedingfield said. “They need to learn to write in cursive and how to think.”

And the arts are not considered an elective here. They are incorporated into regular lessons like social studies, and math and science projects often look like pieces of artwork. Singing is an everyday activity, and students have the opportunity to learn other skills like molding beeswax, baking bread and painting with watercolors.

Dania Guido, a teacher at Suncoast Waldorf, was educated through Waldorf schools and has always enjoyed the simple yet challenging approach of the teachings. Reading, for instance, starts with a literary path of fairytales that continues through fables, Old Testament stories, Norse and Greek myths and culminates in eighth grade with stories about the French and American revolutions, explorations and beyond.

“I love the way the world was sort of unveiled to me and that I could really see it with such love and passion,” Guido said. It’s something she’s excited to share now with her own teachings. “With us, we’re not bogged down by the testing that other schools are required to give,” she said. “We get to really teach based on the needs of the student and the class as a whole.”

The Porter family is one example of those benefiting from Step Up at Suncoast Waldorf School.

Rebecca Porter liked the idea of a Waldorf education and came to Dunedin near Clearwater, Fla., from Orlando so her daughters could attend Suncoast Waldorf School. When finances became challenging after she and her husband separated, she applied for the Step Up scholarship for her eldest, Mia. Mia also tried an arts charter school before coming back to Suncoast, where she recently completed the eighth grade. Rebecca’s other daughter, Aine, did not qualify for the scholarship because of a public school requirement. While both children have done well, Suncoast has been especially beneficial for Mia, who has had some learning challenges, said Rebecca.

“She seems there is more patience for her being who she is,” said Rebecca, sitting on a bench outside of the school. “There was a lot of testing that gave her a lot of anxiety. It gave her a lot of health issues from the anxiety, but she easily transitioned back here. I feel like she’s had an enriched curriculum, like a ‘gifted student’ here, and she’s doing well.”

The school has been serving nursery school children through eighth grade, but during the 2012-13 school year, the school faculty and board of trustees made a strategic decision to add a third kindergarten class, more parent-child play groups for children 3 and under, and teach through fifth grade, beginning with the 2013-14 school year.

about SUNCOAST WALDORF SCHOOL

While Suncoast Waldorf typically doesn’t use standardized tests, it administers the Basic Achievement Skills Inventory test annually to academically measure its Step Up For Students scholars, as required by the scholarship program. For the 2012-13 school year, 21 of the school’s 105 students were Step Up scholarship recipients. Tuition for the 2012-13 school year ranged from $8,775 in kindergarten to nearly $11,000 for eighth graders.
South Florida Jewish Academy

Coconut Creek

Baila Gansburg was preparing to open a Jewish preschool when opportunity came knocking at a site in Coconut Creek that used to house a school for children with special needs. “Parents came and begged us to reopen a special needs school,” Gansburg recalled.

The former school, which educated children with challenges, including autism, attention deficit disorder, auditory processing disorder and dyslexia, recently had closed its doors for financial reasons. Chabad Lubavitch of Coconut Creek and west Pompano Beach, where Gansburg’s husband, Yossi Gansburg, is the rabbi, purchased the 5,500-square-foot, 2½-acre property to serve its community’s youngest members with plans of Gansburg running the preschool. The parents of the former school, however, couldn’t bear to let it go.

While Baila Gansburg was no stranger to education, she had never worked with special needs children. The idea, she said frankly, was overwhelming. So back to work on the preschool she went. Or so she thought.

“After saying no for six months, they kept coming back and said, ‘please try,’” Gansburg said, adding that sometimes the parents brought their children with them to make their pleas. “They said no one else would take their kids.” She no longer had the will to say no and found the courage instead to say yes. “It was their persistence and the fact their kids had nowhere else to go,” Gansburg said. “I said, ‘Well, I’ll try it for a year.’ And we have been here ever since.”

Now in its seventh year, the school has gone from a dozen students that first year to 50 enrolled in the 2012-13 school year. Of those, 13 were Step Up scholars. The school also accepts the McKay Scholarship for students with disabilities, but Gansburg knew Step Up could help those students who had special challenges and didn’t meet the criteria for that program. And while tuition for the 2012-13 school year was $18,995, Gansburg says she works with families to bridge the tuition gap because she knows the children who are there really need her school’s environment to succeed.

Once Gansburg committed to a special needs school, she hired professionals and consultants who possessed the knowledge she didn’t, and she started educating herself by taking classes and traveling to centers around the nation that cater to children with special needs. Now she has an 18-member staff of both full- and part-time employees, including teachers, aides and a therapist. “It definitely took a turn into something I never expected,” she said.

The school became much more than Gansburg imagined. “It became a beautiful school where the kids are totally integrated,” she said. The student body has changed from all children with special challenges to half who are “typical students,” as she describes them. “The kids who don’t have special needs typically learn to respect those who do, and it is a beautiful thing,” she said.

At South Florida Jewish Academy, all students have individualized curricula, and students of different grade levels share the same classrooms. “In most schools they have tutors who push to catch up students who are behind, and we have tutors who push them ahead,” Gansburg said.

Gansburg said her school has been so successful in such a short time that more parents are registering children with minor learning disabilities or who just need the benefits of a smaller classroom. Either way, the results for their students are expected to be positive. “We don’t allow the word can’t in our school because if you say can’t you’re not trying,” Gansburg said. “We turn can’t into can.”

And it’s something her teachers take to heart as well. “What people should know about our school is that we have the ability to bring out the potential in every child whether typical or special,” said Jodi Blum, who teaches language arts and social studies. “We take children with challenges and turn their challenges into gifts.”

Devorah Schwartz drives her youngest two sons 30 miles one way from Hallandale Beach to attend the school. Her son Elimelech, or “Eli,” was getting D’s in the first grade. “His son was struggling in school terribly. He kept saying, ‘I’m stupid,’” Devorah said.

The words were something she wasn’t going to accept for Eli, who has visual perception issues and dyslexia. Devorah, who with her rabbi husband has 11 children, heard about the South Florida Jewish Academy and applied for the Step Up For Students scholarships for her two youngest boys in 2008. She’s seen improvements ever since. “Both of my sons are doing so well there,” she said.

Especially Eli, who came in reading on a first-grade level and six months later had graduated to the third-grade level. “I see him being more confident even at home,” Devorah said. “If you can’t read, that’s the end of learning anything. He is learning and is confident about trying new things. He used to say, ‘I can’t and I can’t and I can’t.’”

But, Devorah said, that phrase has disappeared from his vocabulary.

About South Florida Jewish Academy

The K-12 school has been serving children with special needs for nearly seven years. It is accredited by Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement. It had 50 students enrolled in the 2012-13 school year, 13 of whom were Step Up scholars. Annual tuition for the 2012-13 school year was $18,995. It uses the Stanford 10 standardized test to measure academic achievement.
By the time June Page was 6 years old, she already knew she wanted to be a teacher. “I loved my first-grade teacher, so I think she had made some impact on that decision,” she said smiling, now with several decades of teaching under her belt. She won’t dare tell her age and will only say she has been teaching “more years than I care to count.”

Her career in education began as a second-grade teacher in Chicago public schools, and then she moved to Florida while still in her 20s, teaching mostly language arts in Pinellas County. After a job or two out of the field, she returned to education, teaching kindergarten at a preschool in Tampa. But it wasn’t until she found her current job beginning in the 1995-96 school year at the American Youth Academy that she finally felt most comfortable at a school.

June heard about a teacher opening at the school and applied. But when she stepped on campus it wasn’t like any school she had ever visited. “I wasn’t sure what to expect, but I was very pleasantly surprised,” she recalled. “They welcomed me with open arms.”

The American Youth Academy (AYA) is one of two Islamic schools in Tampa. On campus, most students, teachers and parents wear traditional Islamic clothing—the women and girls at times in abayas, like dresses, and hijabs to cover their heads, and men and boys in longer shirts or tunics and pants. Arabic is taught and sometimes spoken. And because Muslims answer the call to prayer five times a day, there’s a mosque on campus.

At AYA, June is “Sister June.” Out of respect for each other, it is customary for Muslims to refer to each other as brothers and sisters. Sister June is not the only non-Muslim teacher, but she was one of the first. When she was hired, administrators wanted to make sure she was comfortable with their customs and respectful of them, she said. “They gave me a book to read about Islam, and I observed a lot,” she said. “I have a lot of respect for the Muslim people, and I didn’t want to go anywhere else once I got here.”

And, as it turns out, the feeling is quite mutual. Sister June delights in teaching kindergarten now, but through the years she has played many roles at the school, including elementary school director, and when the school principal abruptly resigned at one point, she served as acting principal.

Even after all the years of teaching, Sister June is still passionate about what she does. She loves the process and the fact that by the end of school year, her kindergarteners have developed basic learning skills. “It gives me goose bumps to see how far they’ve come,” she said.

On a rainy spring day in 2013, Sister June’s students were a little stir-crazy from staying indoors, but when it came time to read from the journal entries they wrote, the children listened intently to their peers. The ones doing the readings and standing in front of the class beam with pride even when Sister June gently helped them with words they stumbled on. When the school’s administrators talk about Sister June, their words could not be any kinder. “I think she is a real pillar of the school,” said Sister Magda Saleh, head of the school. “We told her she has a job here until she can’t work anymore.”

It’s not just the way she teaches, they say. It’s the respect she has for the education system as a whole. “She will ask all the students to stand up for administrators when they walk into the classroom,” said Brother Mahmoud Gomaa, the school’s vice principal. “I believe she is a gift from God. People dedicate their lives for a purpose. For her, it is to teach.”

Sister June won’t easily accept the compliments, however. She says she’s just doing her job. “She is definitely driven and passionate about what she does,” said Brother Souheil Zekri, AYA’s principal, adding that even in tough situations Sister June is outstanding. “She is very humble, though. If you tell her she is doing a good job, she says, ‘I am just doing what all the other teachers are doing.’”

Khawla Awwad has two children in the Step Up program, Lana Shada, now in fourth grade, and Adam Shada, now in first grade, and both had Sister June as a teacher. “She’s a very good teacher, and I’m very happy with her,” Khawla said. “There are a lot of parents who love how she teaches the kids and how she has the patience to do it.”

One of the things that energizes Sister June’s love of teaching is learning. “Technology is changing everything and it’s amazing,” she said, adding that she takes online courses whenever she can. “I’m still learning.”

While at AYA, though, perhaps the biggest lesson she has learned is one about herself and being able to see that beyond her societal and cultural differences, this school is where she’s supposed to be. “I don’t know that there’s anything that different,” she said. “It feels like home.”

**TEACHER spotlight**

**JUNE PAGE**

_American Youth Academy, Tampa_

By the time June Page was 6 years old, she already knew she wanted to be a teacher. “I loved my first-grade teacher, so I think she had made some impact on that decision,” she said smiling, now with several decades of teaching under her belt. She won’t dare tell her age and will only say she has been teaching “more years than I care to count.”

Her career in education began as a second-grade teacher in Chicago public schools, and then she moved to Florida while still in her 20s, teaching mostly language arts in Pinellas County. After a job or two out of the field, she returned to education, teaching kindergarten at a preschool in Tampa. But it wasn’t until she found her current job beginning in the 1995-96 school year at the American Youth Academy that she finally felt most comfortable at a school.

June heard about a teacher opening at the school and applied. But when she stepped on campus it wasn’t like any school she had ever visited. “I wasn’t sure what to expect, but I was very pleasantly surprised,” she recalled. “They welcomed me with open arms.”

The American Youth Academy (AYA) is one of two Islamic schools in Tampa. On campus, most students, teachers and parents wear traditional Islamic clothing—the women and girls at times in abayas, like dresses, and hijabs to cover their heads, and men and boys in longer shirts or tunics and pants. Arabic is taught and sometimes spoken. And because Muslims answer the call to prayer five times a day, there’s a mosque on campus.

At AYA, June is “Sister June.” Out of respect for each other, it is customary for Muslims to refer to each other as brothers and sisters. Sister June is not the only non-Muslim teacher, but she was one of the first. When she was hired, administrators wanted to make sure she was comfortable with their customs and respectful of them, she said. “They gave me a book to read about Islam, and I observed a lot,” she said. “I have a lot of respect for the Muslim people, and I didn’t want to go anywhere else once I got here.”

And, as it turns out, the feeling is quite mutual. Sister June delights in teaching kindergarten now, but through the years she has played many roles at the school, including elementary school director, and when the school principal abruptly resigned at one point, she served as acting principal.

Even after all the years of teaching, Sister June is still passionate about what she does. She loves the process and the fact that by the end of school year, her kindergarteners have developed basic learning skills. “It gives me goose bumps to see how far they’ve come,” she said.

On a rainy spring day in 2013, Sister June’s students were a little stir-crazy from staying indoors, but when it came time to read from the journal entries they wrote, the children listened intently to their peers. The ones doing the readings and standing in front of the class beam with pride even when Sister June gently helped them with words they stumbled on. When the school’s administrators talk about Sister June, their words could not be any kinder. “I think she is a real pillar of the school,” said Sister Magda Saleh, head of the school. “We told her she has a job here until she can’t work anymore.”

It’s not just the way she teaches, they say. It’s the respect she has for the education system as a whole. “She will ask all the students to stand up for administrators when they walk into the classroom,” said Brother Mahmoud Gomaa, the school’s vice principal. “I believe she is a gift from God. People dedicate their lives for a purpose. For her, it is to teach.”

Sister June won’t easily accept the compliments, however. She says she’s just doing her job. “She is definitely driven and passionate about what she does,” said Brother Souheil Zekri, AYA’s principal, adding that even in tough situations Sister June is outstanding. “She is very humble, though. If you tell her she is doing a good job, she says, ‘I am just doing what all the other teachers are doing.’”

Khawla Awwad has two children in the Step Up program, Lana Shada, now in fourth grade, and Adam Shada, now in first grade, and both had Sister June as a teacher. “She’s a very good teacher, and I’m very happy with her,” Khawla said. “There are a lot of parents who love how she teaches the kids and how she has the patience to do it.”

One of the things that energizes Sister June’s love of teaching is learning. “Technology is changing everything and it’s amazing,” she said, adding that she takes online courses whenever she can. “I’m still learning.”

While at AYA, though, perhaps the biggest lesson she has learned is one about herself and being able to see that beyond her societal and cultural differences, this school is where she’s supposed to be. “I don’t know that there’s anything that different,” she said. “It feels like home.”

_**About American Youth Academy**_

American Youth Academy is a private Islamic school that serves 205 Step Up For Students scholars and 448 students overall in grades pre-K–12. Tuition for the 2012-13 school year was $5,300 to $5,500, depending on grade level. The school uses the Comprehensive Testing Program 4 to measure academic achievement.
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