Renewal parents and guardians: Applications for the 2014-15 school year are now open

With the 2013-14 school year nearly half completed, families who haven’t started thinking about the next school year are urged to prepare now.

In October, Step Up For Students opened its application season early for the upcoming school year for current families. New families will be able to apply about a month earlier as well, with an opening anticipated for early February. Applications will continue to be accepted until scholarship funding is exhausted.

As of mid-November, nearly 13,000 returning students had been approved for the 2014-15 school year in the first five weeks of application processing, said Anne White, Step Up’s vice president of operations. “We know that because we usually open applications in February, it can be stressful for families to wait on hearing if their children will receive the scholarship when most schools open enrollment in January,” White said. “With earlier applications for the 2014-15 year, they can now know ahead of time and enroll earlier at their chosen Step Up partner schools.”

The rest of the process remains the same. Applications are completed online at www.StepUpForStudents.org. They are still awarded on a first-come, first-served financial need basis. Preference is given to renewal students, White said. Once completed, award letters can be downloaded and printed.

“Renewal families should apply now to avoid the rush in the spring and better the chances of being awarded a scholarship,” she said. “And new families should sign up for our interest list so they are notified about the exact date we will open.”

A link to the interest list can be found on the Step Up For Students homepage. Families already using the Step Up program are asked to spread the word about the scholarship opportunity with other families who may qualify for the program by directing them to the Step Up website. An informational cutout card can also be found at the bottom of Page 3 of this newsletter.

“We are excited to share the great news about Step Up with families who may qualify for the program,” said Alissa Ciaramello, vice president of marketing, public relations, events and community outreach. “Please join us in getting the word out so other families may find the best learning environment for their children’s needs too.”

Step Up scholars continue to keep pace in testing

The latest report card for Step Up For Students has arrived, and students can take a bow. For the fifth consecutive year, scholarship students kept pace academically with students of all income levels nationally.

“These test results are truly encouraging,” said Doug Tuthill, Step Up president. “The scholarship serves students who have really struggled in their prior schools and who are among the poorest students in all of Florida’s education system. This tells us they are making genuine academic progress every year.”

Scholarship students are required by law to take a nationally norm-referenced test approved by the state, and most take the Stanford Achievement Test. A report from the Department of Education in August, looked at the test results for 2011-12 and echoed two previous findings: 1) The students who choose the scholarship were among the lowest performers from the public schools they left behind; 2) Their gains in reading and math standardized test scores matched the gains of all test-takers across the nation, which the researcher says means they have gained a full year’s worth of knowledge.

The researcher, Northwestern University economist David Figlio, stated: “A cautious read of the weight of the available evidence suggests that the … scholarship program has boosted student performance in public schools statewide, that the program draws disproportionately low-income, poorly performing students from the public schools into the private schools, and that the students who moved, perform as well or better once they move to the private schools.”

For the second year, the report also compared test score gains for individual schools with at least 30 Step Up scholarship students with current and prior-year test results. Out of those 88 schools, 60 posted three-year learning gains that met or exceeded the national average and 28 fell short.
Waste Management pledges funding for nearly 895 scholarships

While the Miami Marlins enjoyed a 7-0 win over the Washington Nationals on Sept. 6, Step Up For Students got the equivalent of a grand slam that same evening at Marlins Park.

Shortly before the first pitch, Step Up For Students President Doug Tuthill, who was standing near home plate with Step Up scholars, Waste Management Government Affairs Manager Alex Gonzalez and State Rep. Manny Diaz Jr., accepted an oversized check from Waste Management, pledging $4.5 million, which equates to nearly 895 scholarships.

“We are very grateful for the leadership at Waste Management and the company’s support of equal educational opportunities for Florida’s youth,” Tuthill said before the on-field presentation. “Waste Management’s community involvement is very impressive, and we can’t think of a better way to ensure success in a community than to make sure its future leaders are well prepared and well educated.”

Including its 2013 pledge, Waste Management has contributed more than $20 million to Step Up For Students since first partnering with the organization in 2007.

“At Waste Management, we are committed to making the communities where we do business better places to work and live,” said Waste Management Community Affairs Manager Dawn McCormick. “We see our involvement with Step Up For Students as an extension of that commitment, and are proud to help almost 900 Florida families find the school that best fits their child’s needs this school year.”

Waste Management officials arranged for the on-field check presentation and sponsored the evening at the game for five Step Up scholars and their families, for some of whom it was their first time at a major league game.

Joseph Estime, a second-grader at Grace Academy International in Opa-Locka, said he was thankful to Step Up and Waste Management for the scholarship and for the chance to see the Marlins play in person. His siblings David and Esther, 10th and eighth grade, respectively, at Grace Academy, also attended the game.

“It’s amazing,” Joseph said, grinning from ear to ear. Joseph and his brother and sister were on their feet bursting with excitement for most of the game. “Let’s go Fish!” “Let’s go Fish,” Joseph chanted in the third inning, cheering on the Marlins.

A moment later, Marlins left fielder Logan “LoMo” Morrison slammed the ball for a two-run home run, giving the home team a 5-0 lead. The hit flew 467 feet – and was recorded as the longest home run in Marlins Park history.

Step Up For Students receives $4.5 million from Waste Management for scholarship funds in 2013.

From left: Grace Academy International students David, Esther and Joseph Estime; Step Up For Students President Doug Tuthill; Champagnat Catholic School in Hialeah students Maria and Dayanna Garcia; Florida State Rep. Manny Diaz Jr.; Waste Management Government Affairs Manager Alex Gonzalez with his granddaughter Samantha Masood.

Southern Wine & Spirits of America, Inc. donates $25 million

When Southern Wine & Spirits of America, Inc. President and Chief Operating Officer Wayne E. Chaplin announced in October that his company was donating $25 million to Step Up For Students this year, an audience of students, teachers, parents and local distinguished guests collectively gasped and broke into applause.

Chaplin made the announcement Oct. 4 at Yeshiva Elementary School in Miami Beach, where Southern, the nation’s largest distributor of wine and spirits, was being honored for its commitment to Step Up For Students, and teacher Dana Sostchin was being recognized after receiving a Shine Award from Florida Gov. Rick Scott on Sept. 24 for her dedication to education.

Before pledging the donation, Chaplin was playful with the audience, comprised mostly of schoolchildren.

“How much do you think we are donating today?” he asked.


“We are proud to donate $25 million to Step Up For Students,” he said.

With that, some children and teachers jumped to their feet, cheering.

Southern’s 2013 pledge will bring the company’s total contribution to $60 million since 2010. Based in Miami, the 45-year-old company has operations in 35 markets across the nation and has nearly 14,500 employees. Southern is committed to social responsibility and takes an active role in promoting safe use of alcoholic beverages. The company also makes it a priority to give back to the communities it serves by donating to national, state and local charitable organizations and partners with companies that do the same, according to company leaders.

During the event at Yeshiva, Chaplin also presented a contribution of school supplies from Southern Wine & Spirits’ office supply partner, Staples, to the school.

“We at Southern believe that a quality education is the best path to a successful future,” said Chaplin. “For this reason – and in the spirit of giving back to the Florida communities we operate in – Southern is proud to do its part by partnering with Step Up For Students. Our company has helped more than 13,000 students attend schools like Yeshiva Elementary,” added Chaplin in reference to the company’s third year of partnership with Step Up.

Chaplin also congratulated Sostchin, the honored teacher. She, too, spoke before the audience of nearly 200 people during the celebratory event.

“I am truly honored and flattered to accept this recognition on behalf of our school,” said Sostchin, who has been teaching at the school for more than 20 years. “And in doing so, I wish to acknowledge the rest of our outstanding faculty, administration, staff, students and parents here at Y.E.S., as I believe it is this atmosphere of dedication and mutual respect that encourages all of us to help and learn from each other, and makes our school such a special place.”

Step Up Chairman and Founder John Kirtley noted that the success of the program is dependent on the spirit of collaboration.

“I am so grateful for both Ms. Sostchin’s and Southern’s contributions to the education of these children. Because of the efforts from dedicated teachers, legislators and donors, about 60,000 students this school year are receiving an education that their families have handpicked;” he said. “Today is a great example of the amazing things we can accomplish when we come together for the success of our children.”
SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT
Charlotte Academy

Back in 1995, four Charlotte County mothers chatted about how there wasn't a single local preschool good enough for their "extraordinarily talented and gifted 4- and 5-year-old children."

“The solution was self-evident – we would create one,” said Geri Waksler, a co-founder of Charlotte Academy, now a pre-K through eighth-grade school. She served as the keynote to the Class of 2006 during its eighth-grade graduation, sharing with them the story of how the school was founded and challenging the graduates to take a leap like she did with three friends to make a dream a reality.

Back in 1995, Waksler, Ellen Erich, Peggy Vasu and Kathy Wynn, all well-educated professionals, but without backgrounds in education or prior experience setting up a business, started making plans mostly over their kitchen tables, sometimes in a local park and once at a local funeral parlor.

While the women had no start-up capital, they were so mission-driven that in 1996, just nine months after they began, Charlotte County Day School opened its doors in what had been an old rundown law office in Punta Gorda, to 22 students, ages 3 to 6, in two classrooms.

Anne Schofield-Miller, the first teacher at the school, remembers the early days distinctly. She knew the women from when they taught children at a local Montessori preschool and had moved onto a public school for a short time. The women had decided they wanted a Montessori curriculum – an educational approach based on the teacher observing a child’s natural development – and wanted Schofield-Miller to help create the curriculum and join them in setting up the school.

“I will never forget walking in and opening up the door to this building that was downstairs in Punta Gorda,” Schofield-Miller said. “It was dark and had yellow sheets on dark paneling on the walls.”

When parents heard what they were doing, however, the donations started pouring in. And then came the sweat equity.

Parents tore down the paneling, painted the walls bright colors, hung new curtains and brought tables from their own homes. The transformation was amazing, Schofield-Miller said.

“It was just adorable, and it was the cutest building ever,” she said. “More than that, it was homey because of the collective effort and because of what the parents wanted for their children.”

Within a year, the school expanded and literally busted through the walls into what used to be a thrift store next to the former law office. It added a third teacher. In 1999, the school changed its name to Charlotte Academy, and by 2002, it had built and moved into its current location in Port Charlotte.

“I’m amazed every time I walk through the hallways, and honestly, a little tear-eyed at times because it keeps going and going and going,” said Schofield-Miller, who retired after the 2012-13 school year, but still substitutes often at the academy.

Today, the school is set on 10 acres and boasts 10 classrooms in two buildings. About 138 students in preschool through eighth grade attend the school, which continues to use a Montessori curriculum through third grade and a traditional school curriculum for fourth through eighth grades. Strong academics are a pillar of the school, with leadership, community involvement and parental engagement being a significant part of students’ overall education. Students participate in a community garden, Spanish classes, physical education and much more to round out their experience. The school uses the Stanford 10 to measure academic success, and during the 2011-12 school year, 77 percent of seventh-graders scored at the post high school level for the Basic Battery test in reading, mathematics and language.

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APPLICATION ALERT:

2014-15 Applications Available Early: Renewal families can apply now online for the 2014-15 school year. New family applications will open in February. Scholarships are awarded first-come, first-served, so beat the rush.

PARENTS:

Don’t forget to visit the new “Public Services for Parents” section of our website, where you can find community-partner organizations that may be helpful to you. This section is found in the green box on the right side of the home page under “For Parents.”

SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

At $8,275, the tuition is on the higher end of most Step Up partner schools, but several Step Up scholars receive additional scholarships from the school to cover the gap, according to Valerie Selley, the school’s business office manager. They hope to make more families aware and enroll more Step Up students, Selley added.

“It definitely opens the doors to families who otherwise could not afford to come,” she said. “I believe that there are parents out there that don’t even know that this program exists, and that we accept it here.”

Cheryl Delzell heard about Charlotte Academy through her close friends and thought she could never send her young son, Clifford, known to his friends as “Casey,” to such an expensive school.

“I’d give my right arm to send him, but I can’t afford it,” she told her friends, who then told her about Step Up.

After visiting her neighborhood schools, Cheryl was even more convinced that Charlotte Academy was the place for Casey and was thrilled when she learned they had been awarded a scholarship so he could start kindergarten there.

“It’s a very small school, which to me, I like because everybody knows everybody,” Cheryl said. “You feel safe when you walk through the door. It’s very warm, very inviting. The teachers are the best – absolutely the best.”

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

lessons at our old school, my teachers would just put me in the back of the class and move on, instead of helping me. But once I started at Champagnat, the teachers always made sure we kids understood the work,” Maria said. “I now sit in the front of the classroom for every subject because I know that’s where I learn best.”

Isabel Alonso, director of academics for Champagnat, has enjoyed watching the twins grow.

“Maria and Dayanna are sweet-spirited young ladies with an optimistic view of life,” she said. “Since their young age they have been a true joy. I am proud of their accomplishments thus far and am excited to see how they partake in unfolding their future.”

Dayanna hopes to attend either Johnson & Wales University in Miami, or another culinary arts school and dreams of opening her own bakery.

“I really want to make a name for myself and make everyone who has helped me proud,” she said.

Maria, while uncertain where she will go to college, is positive she will go and plans to study either science or business. She loves the idea of running the business side of her sister’s bakery one day.

“The hardest part for us as we get closer to our graduation in the spring is thinking about living life apart from each other,” Maria said. “But we know that no matter what we do, or where we go, we will be fine because of the love and support of each other and the rest of our family.”

About Champagnat Catholic School

Champagnat Catholic School was founded by Reinaldo Alonso, a former principal of schools in Cuba, and his wife, Maria. It was started under the auspices of the Marist Brothers, an international community of the Catholic Religious Institute of Brothers founded by St. Marcellin Champagnat, a priest from France who had a passion for education because he lacked a formal education of his own. Champagnat opened its doors on Sept. 8, 1968, at the corner of 29th Avenue and Seventh Street SW in Miami with 123 students, but now sits at 1851 Palm Ave., Hialeah. The school currently serves grades pre-K through 12 and has 199 students, including 117 Step Up scholars, enrolled for the 2013-14 school year. Tuition ranges from $3,750 to $4,450 and the school uses Stanford 10 to measure students’ academic success.