

Step Up For Students
601 N Ashley Drive
Suite #300
Tampa, FL 33602

PRSR STD
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
Permit #332
Tampa, FL



IMPORTANT UPDATES ON SCHOOL CHOICE IN FLORIDA



THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF STEP UP FOR STUDENTS



FEBRUARY '06

NEWSLETTER

The Official Newsletter of Step Up for Students

H.E.R.O.E.S. AND CHILDREN FIRST-CENTRAL FLORIDA MERGE

The H.E.R.O.E.S. and Children First-Central Florida have merged following the retirement of Children First-Central Florida's executive director Sally Simmons. The new organization, Children First Florida, will serve all of North Florida and the Panhandle south to Orlando and the Treasure Coast.

Sally retired to Boston, Mass. to spend time with her children and grandchildren. Her enthusiasm and strong leadership will be sorely missed.

H.E.R.O.E.S.' former executive director, Cindy Forster, has stepped up as the executive director of Children First Florida. She will oversee offices in both Jacksonville and Orlando that remain open to serve as a local connection for parents and scholarship recipients.



FLORIDA SUPREME COURT STRIKES DOWN OPPORTUNITY SCHOLARSHIPS

On Jan. 5, the Florida Supreme Court issued a ruling declaring Opportunity Scholarships unconstitutional.

The program allows students assigned to a public school that has failed two years out of the past four to attend a better public school or a private school. The Court said the program violates Article IX of the Florida Constitution which requires the state to provide a "uniform, efficient, safe, secure, and high quality system of free public schools."

Although the ruling is a blow to supporters of all scholarship programs, the Step Up For Students program is NOT AT RISK at this time. The scholarship opponents who sued the state to dismantle Opportunity Scholarships may well attack other scholarship programs now. It is extremely important that we shore up support for these programs now. To help immediately, visit <http://www.face.org>



www.face.org and click on the red box at the top that says "Opportunity Scholarships Struck Down." You will be taken to an action alert about the ruling. Simply edit the suggested letter to your elected official, enter your contact information and it will automatically be sent to your legislators.

To read more about how you can help, see page 3 of this newsletter for information on the Save Our Students rally in Tallahassee on Feb. 15. Hope to see you there!



You can support scholarships by visiting www.face.org and clicking on the large red box. You will be directed to information about the case and a letter form for you to fill out. We automatically match you with your elected official so your voice will be heard in Tallahassee.

INSIDE: JOIN US FOR RALLY 2006!



WELLSTUDENT

If your children meet the income standards to qualify for a Step Up For Students Scholarship, they may also qualify for Florida's health insurance program for uninsured children, Florida KidCare.

Florida KidCare is a program that includes Medicaid, MediKids, Healthy Kids and the Children's Medical Services Network. MediKids, Healthy Kids and the Children's Medical Services Network provide health insurance to children without health insurance whose family income exceeds Medicaid eligibility.

MediKids, Healthy Kids and the Children's Medical Services Network have limited space, and applications are accepted on a first-come, first-served basis. By completing one application for Florida KidCare, you apply for all 4 programs and will be informed which one your child qualifies for.

To qualify for Florida KidCare a child must:

- Be under age 19,
- Be uninsured,
- Meet income eligibility requirements,
- Be a U.S. citizen or qualified non-citizen,
- Not be the dependent of a state employee eligible for health insurance,
- Not be in a public institution, and Employer sponsored insurance greater than 5% of your income for the reduced rate.

Cost:

- There is no charge for Medicaid for children
- For the other Florida KidCare programs, monthly premiums depend on your household size and income. Most families pay \$15 or \$20 a month.
- You may have to pay small charges or co-payments for some services.

You can apply for Florida KidCare by mail, facsimile (FAX), hand delivery, or by e-mail as scanned attachments. In order to apply, send it to:

Florida KidCare

Mail: P.O. Box 980, Tallahassee, FL 32302-0980

FAX: (850) 681-2131

Overnight or hand delivery:

661 East Jefferson Street, 2nd Floor,

Tallahassee, FL 32301

E-mail: apply@healthykids.org

For additional information call toll-free: 1-888-540-5437



STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

Jermaine Jr. and Diamonte Grace, ages 11 and 10, have had Step Up For Students scholarships for only one year but they have made remarkable improvements in that short period of time. Failing at their assigned public school and with their father at war in Iraq, their mother knew it was time for a change. With the help and support of the teachers and administrators at Tri-L Christian Academy in Orlando and their mother's encouragement, Jermaine and Diamonte are now earning B's. Both boys are active members of their church, Orlando Junior Margic basketball players and county wide football players. Jermaine Jr. hopes to become a state trooper and Diamonte has his sights set on becoming a firefighter.

The Grace boys' fantastic achievements are the talk of Tri-L and the whole family is grateful to Children First-Florida and Step Up For Students for giving them a chance to reach their full potential. Keep up the good work, Jermaine Jr. and Diamonte!



Jermaine Jr. and Diamonte



Want to nominate your student for our Student Spotlight?
Visit www.stepupforstudents.com/parents.htm
to send us your story.

IT'S TAX TIME

FREE TAX RETURN PREPARATION



The Voluntary Income Tax Preparation (VITA) offers free tax preparation and quick electronic filing for no charge. This is an excellent way to meet your Scholarship requirement for a prepared tax return without cost! There are locations through out your community. To find the location nearest you, call **1-800-829-1040**.

YOU MAY BE ELIGIBLE FOR A LARGER TAX REFUND

A federal program (Earned Income Tax Credit) allows families with limited income to receive up to a \$4,400 larger tax refund. Simply ask your tax preparer if you are eligible. Many of the families that qualify for the Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship Program are also eligible for this program. If you find you are slightly over the scholarship income limits, you can reduce your Adjusted Gross Income by contributing to your IRA Retirement Account prior to April 15, 2006. Your tax preparer and bank or credit union can help you get started.

The Earned Income Tax Credit can be claimed for as many as three years of your past income. Examples include:

- A single person with two children earning less than \$35,263 could receive a credit of up to \$4,400.
- A married couple with one child earning less than \$33,030 could receive a credit of up to \$2,662.

You do not have to wait until you submit your tax return to get this additional income! You can increase your take-home pay throughout the year by as much as \$126 each month by applying for the Advance ETIC. You'll get a portion of your refund in your regular paycheck and receive the remainder at the end of the year. This will not impact the income amount on your tax return or your scholarship eligibility. Talk to your employer to get a full list of the eligibility requirements and how to apply.



2,000 parents, students and teachers rallied for educational options in Tallahassee in 2005. We hope you will join us for this year's rally.

JOIN US FOR 2006 RALLY IN TALLAHASSEE

On Feb. 15, a scholarship support rally will be held in the Capitol Courtyard in Tallahassee to encourage legislators to support scholarship programs in danger. Because of the Supreme Court's ruling striking down Opportunity Scholarships, it is vital that we show elected officials how many Floridians benefit from McKay and Step Up For Students scholarships. The theme is "Save Our Students!"

As usual, the rally will begin with a march from the Civic Center to the Capitol. Gov. Jeb Bush and former senate president John McKay will speak on the importance of school choice programs for the state of Florida. The rally will be followed by a picnic lunch in the Courtyard and legislative visits for schools that wish to meet with their elected officials.

For transportation information and how you can join us please contact Michael Benjamin at **mbenjamin@face.org**. If you are interested in a legislative visit, please contact Denise Lasher at **dlasher@feff.org**. See you in Tallahassee!