The families and schools that are part of the Step Up For Students Scholarship program made national history on March 24. The “Leveling the Playing Field” rally at the State Capitol drew 5,521 participants, making it the largest parent choice rally ever held in the United States.

“This was a remarkable day that shows how much lower-income parents want this empowerment,” said Step Up For Students Chairman John Kirtley. “The support for this program is powerful.”

The rally drew parents, students, educators and activists from all parts of the state and nearly 80 different schools, many of them getting on buses before midnight. It began with a march along Madison Street from the Tallahassee-Leon County Civic Center to the Capitol. They arrived at the Capitol in matching light blue T-shirts repeatedly chanting the words, “We want choices,” and they filled the courtyard from one end to the other. The mission was to urge lawmakers to pass legislation that will expand the program and increase the scholarship amount. This year, the scholarship is serving 27,600 low-income students in 1,020 private schools.

“I hope that people get that this is not about public schools versus private schools,” James Bush III, the acting president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, told the audience. “This is about reading and writing and diplomas and degrees. This is about finding the place where every single student learns the best. This is about fulfilling that very American promise of equal educational opportunity.”

“For corporate America to invest in education of our children, this is a great thing to do,” Democratic Sen. Al Lawson said. “I’ve had parents tell me of problems their kids have had in other schools and, because of this program, their kids have turned around.”

“It’s all about education, my friends, all about education,” Gov. Charlie Crist said. “The power of choice in education is unstoppable.”

A parental choice rally backed by public school teachers

As thousands took to the Capitol March 24 to support Step Up For Students, they received the support from an unexpected group: public school teachers from Miami-Dade County.

The teachers are part of a new effort called the Coalition of Hispanic Instructors in Support of Parental Awareness, or CHISPA. The mission of CHISPA is to identify Hispanic students at-risk of failing and to help parents understand the educational choices available to them.

“These teachers know as we know that we are all partners in this endeavor,” said Julio Fuentes, president and chief executive officer of the parental choice advocacy group Hispanic CREO, which established CHISPA. “We believe that the parent is the superintendent of their home, so CHISPA will make every effort to empower the parent with the fundamental right to choose the right school for their child.”

The nearly two dozen teachers who attended the rally work in several middle and elementary schools in Miami-Dade County Public Schools. As a group, they have committed to helping Hispanic CREO improve the educational outcomes for Hispanic students.

“They would do that by exhausting every option they have in the classroom to reach a child at-risk of dropping out. When all else fails, they will help HCREO inform the child’s parents of the school choices available.

“While public education remains vital to our sense of community, our community has grown to include many who want to reach out to the children who need the greatest help,” said Lorena Castillo, a science teacher at Homestead Middle School and the chairwoman of CHISPA. “Our public schools have done outstanding work and they have done a great job creating options most of us never had when we were in school. But HCREO and CHISPA recognize that every child is unique and needs a unique learning environment to succeed.”

Legislation Update

The day of the rally, March 24, the Florida Senate passed a bill, CS/SB 2126, that would strengthen and expand the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, also known as the Step Up For Students Scholarship. The Senate passed the bill by a bipartisan majority of 27-11. The next day, the House Finance and Tax Council passed a companion bill, CS/HB 1009, by a bipartisan majority of 13-2. As of press time, the bill had not yet reached the House floor. The bills would also increase the scholarship amount steadily for six years until it reaches 80 percent of per-student operational public school spending.
Greetings. This is a beautiful crowd. Thank you for being here and caring about education.

I stand before you today not as a legislator but as a messenger. I am here to bring you the word of an organization that was born a half-century ago when a dignified woman in Montgomery, Alabama, named Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus to a white man. Those of you who know your history lessons will know that the resulting boycott helped to change the course of this nation and led to the creation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. You also know that the SCLC was the embodiment of the ideals of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who was its founding president.

Dr. King once said that the true goal of education was to build both intelligence and character, and that is why we are here today. We are here because we know that true liberation is not just about changing laws but about lifting minds. We know that our children can and must do better in school, and that something has to change if they are going to live Dr. King’s dream.

In Florida today, we suffer a gap of academic achievement that is incomprehensible—a gap that means a black student is twice as likely as a white to drop out and only three-fourths as likely to graduate, a gap that finds more than half of black students in Florida last year reading below their grade level. I say to every one of you in this amazing audience today—to the students, the parents, the teachers and the activists—we are going to change that.

What I see here today is a will that can’t be defeated. I see confidence and commitment. I see a Tax Credit Scholarship that has stimulated and motivated you, and I dearly hope my friends in these buildings behind you understand all that. I hope that people get that this is not about public schools versus private schools. This is about reading and writing and diplomas and degrees. This is about finding the place where every single student learns the best. This is about fulfilling that very American promise of equal educational opportunity.

It is no coincidence that the first African-American to live in the White House is a man with an Ivy League degree, and just last summer President Obama made a powerful point about our history. “There’s a reason,” our President said, “the story of the civil rights movement was written in our schools. There’s a reason,” he said, “that Thurgood Marshall took up the cause of Linda Brown. There’s a reason,” he said, “why the Little Rock Nine defied a governor and a mob. It’s because,” President Obama told us, “there is no stronger weapon against inequality and no better path to opportunity than an education that can unlock a child’s God-given potential.”

I say to you today that the Tax Credit Scholarship program is one of the keys we use to unlock that potential. It is one way we can reach some of those children who go to bed hungry at night. It is one way we show that an empty pocketbook doesn’t have to mean an empty bookshelf—-that all our learning tools need to be on the table for all our children.

I am here today as a messenger of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and I am here to proudly proclaim that the organization created by Dr. King believes that a scholarship for low-income children is one way to break the cycle and close the gap. I am here, standing before this inspiring sea of hopeful faces, to announce that the Southern Christian Leadership Conference endorses the bill this year that will expand the cycle and close the gap. I am here, standing before this inspiring sea of hopeful faces, to announce that the Southern Christian Leadership Conference endorses the bill this year that will expand the gap. I am here, standing before this inspiring sea of hopeful faces, to announce that the Southern Christian Leadership Conference endorses the bill this year that will expand the gap.

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Student Spotlight

Taylor Barnes / Saint Petersburg Christian School, St. Petersburg, FL

Taylor Barnes has her sights set on middle school and the opportunities it offers: volleyball, cheerleading, dance, just to start. She’s showing excitement at school again, to the relief of her mother, who still thinks about the serious health threats Taylor has overcome in her young life.

Taylor’s mother, Shannon Coates, had never thought private school would be an option – she went through public schools and her mother was a respected administrator in the Pinellas County school district – but each passing day affirms the decision she made five years ago. Now that her daughter has recovered from brain surgery in the fourth grade and surmounted a challenging academic environment upon her return, Ms. Coates remains committed to keeping her daughter in the private school environment that has been critical to her success.

“It’s the best thing for her,” Ms. Coates says, referring to Taylor’s time at St. Petersburg Christian School, where she’s in the fifth grade. “Now she is ready. She’s been able to do all the things I had in mind,” Ms. Coates says. But she made the leap of faith, choosing to send her then-5-year-old daughter, Yvonne Reed-Clayton, known for her savvy in educating young children. “Private school was something that never came to my mind,” Ms. Coates says. But she made the leap of faith, and she has never regretted it.

Taylor consistently scored high on the Stanford Achievement Test and, as a kindergartner, read at a second-grade level. She stayed at Yvonne C. Reed Christian School through the third-grade, when Ms. Coates began searching for a school that might encourage Taylor’s budding creativity.

She discovered Classical Christian School for the Arts just north of St. Petersburg, where Taylor’s performing-arts talents flourished.

As the school year progressed, however, Taylor got sick. She suffered from seizures before doctors found that her brain stem was crowding her spinal cord. She needed surgery, which ultimately corrected the problem. But she missed nearly three months of school.

By the end of the school year, administrators wanted to retain Taylor in the fourth grade. Such a move would have devastated her, Ms. Coates says. “Everybody would know she repeated.” She decided to place Taylor in the renowned Academy Prep of St. Petersburg for her fifth-grade year, but the challenging environment soon took its toll on Taylor, particularly in math. While she tested into the sixth-grade at the Pinellas school district by the end of the year, her mother had to decide what was best. She made Taylor repeat the fifth grade this year, and this time at St. Petersburg Christian School.

“It was not easy for me,” Coates says. “I know how hard it was for her. But I wanted her to get comfortable and I wanted her to enjoy school.”

Immediately, the results were clear: Taylor has made the honor roll twice; she joined the school band and learned to play the trumpet; her math skills improved and she started taking Spanish.

Her teachers have taken notice, too, noting how skillfully Taylor can express herself in dance and is always eager to raise her hand during classroom discussions.

“She works hard in everything she does,” says Kelsey Bennett, one of Taylor’s teachers. “She takes her time to make sure everything is right.”

Taylor looks forward to coming to school, where, she says, “everyone is nice and no one laughs at you.” Her mother looks forward to the future. With the help of the Step Up For Students Scholarship, Ms. Coates says she’s been able to find the right school for her child, even when rough times forced her to make difficult decisions. Her daughter is thriving because of that opportunity and she says she’ll do whatever she can to ensure Taylor remains on this path.

“I have to do what’s best for her,” she says.

About St. Petersburg Christian School

St. Petersburg Christian School was the first Christian elementary school in St. Petersburg to receive accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Today, the school enrolls students in grades K-8 and fosters a rigorous academic environment that also encourages the fine arts. While a ministry of Suncoast Cathedral, the school serves children from more than 120 churches and from many nationalities. And, despite a challenging curriculum, its students tend to score above the national average of their peers on the Stanford Achievement Test. Tuition ranges from around $5,800 in kindergarten to around $6,800 for grades 7 and 8.

Want to nominate your student for our Student Spotlight?
Or contact Adam Emerson at aemerson@stepupforstudents.org or call (866) 753-0985, Ext. 233