



NEWSLETTER



Gov. Charlie Crist was surrounded by Step Up For Students supporters when he signed the bill on April 22: From left, Bill cosponsors Sen. Al Lawson and Sen. Gary Siplin, high school senior Denisha Merriweather from Jacksonville, bill sponsor Rep. Will Weatherford, high school junior Jasmine Salter from Tallahassee, bill sponsor Sen. Joe Negron, and Florida TaxWatch president Dominic Calabro.

The scholarship law makes historic change

Florida legislators have put the Step Up For Students Scholarship on a path for historic growth and accountability. The bill that Gov. Charlie Crist signed into law on April 22 allows the scholarship over the next six years to grow by more than \$2,000 and the number of students to climb by at least 20,000.

"This is a milestone in the empowerment of low-income families in Florida and for the parental choice movement nationwide," said John Kirtley, chairman of Step Up For Students. "This bill will make the scholarship more accountable and more available, and I'm heartened that we saw such bipartisan support."

The bill's passage was owed, in part, to the efforts of the students, parents, teachers and principals who partici-

pate in what is known by lawmakers as the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship. The bill was endorsed by five major private school organizations and more than 100 of the largest scholarship schools, even as it required individual schools to disclose test score gains for scholarships and financial practices for the scholarship money. It received support from a broad range of organizations, including Florida TaxWatch, the Black Alliance for Educational Options, the Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options, Agudath Israel, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Parents and educators also spoke to lawmakers throughout the winter and spring, culminating with a Capitol rally on March 24 that drew 5,521 participants

and ranked as the largest parental choice event in the nation's history.

The result was a resounding combined vote in the House and Senate of 122-34, with nearly half the Democrats, a majority of the Black Caucus and all but one of the Hispanic Caucus in support. Sen. Al Lawson, D-Tallahassee, was among the many who spoke in support: "I know in my community how these kids are doing and how much they have been able to benefit from this, and I will tell you that you should just embrace these kids and listen to these kids and what they tell you about how rewarding it has been."

The bill was sponsored in the House by Rep. Will Weatherford, R-Wesley Chapel, and the Senate by Sen. Joe Negron, R-Stuart.

Scholarship goes to \$4,106 with more coming

The Step Up For Students scholarship will rise to \$4,106 this fall under a new law that could push it to more than \$6,000 over the next six years.

The law, which passed by a large bipartisan margin in the Legislature and was signed by Gov. Charlie Crist on April 22, makes dramatic changes to the scholarship program by allowing it to grow to serve more students and making it more academically and fiscally accountable.

The scholarship increase from \$3,950 to \$4,106 is just the first step. The new law indexes the maximum scholarship, which had increased only twice in the past eight years, to annual per-student spending in public schools. For 2010-11, the scholarship is 60 percent of the operational school formula, known as the Florida Education Finance Program. In future years, it will grow to 64, 68, 72, 76 and then top out at 80 percent of that formula.

Those percentages are converted to dollars once the state adopts its public education budget each year. Using conservative estimates, Step Up officials project the scholarship amount will reach more than \$6,000 by 2015-16.

“The scholarship had lost so much ground to inflation that our families were paying hundreds,



DOUG TUTHILL
Step Up For Students President

even thousands, of dollars out of pocket to make up the difference, this helps to level the playing field.”

Step Up For Students Newsletter

Get a raise and keep the scholarship

Parents who get a raise at work won't have to worry about their child losing the entire Step Up For Students scholarship anymore. The new law allows renewing families to keep a large portion of the scholarship as their income increases.

"This has been one of the most heartbreaking parts of the program in the past," said John LeHockey, executive director of scholarships for Step Up For Students. "A student who was attached to his school would not get to return because his family's income might rise literally one dollar over the guideline."

The eligibility to receive a scholarship remains at 185

Higher income limits for household of four

New applicant **\$40,793**

100% renewal **\$44,100**

75% renewal **\$47,408**

50% renewal **\$50,715**

percent of the federal poverty guidelines, which computes currently to \$3,400 a month

for a household of four. What changes is the income threshold for families who want to keep the scholarship in future years. They can keep the full scholarship for their student if the household income grows to less than 200 percent of poverty, and the new law adds two more categories.

If income rises to at least 200 percent but is less than 215 percent, the renewing student is now eligible for 75 percent of the maximum scholarship. If income is at least 215 but not more than 230 percent, the student can get a 50 percent scholarship. Once income exceeds 230 percent, the scholarship ends.

The new law

Scholarships:

Raises the maximum scholarship to \$4,106 this fall and to 80 percent of the public school per-student operation formula over the next six years. (It should exceed \$6,000 by 2015-16.)

Enrollment growth:

Raises the amount of allowed tax-credit contributions from \$118-million to \$140-million in 2010-11. Allows the cap to grow in future years by 25 percent each time 90 percent is reached.

Scholarship renewals:

Protects renewing families who experience small income growth. Those with income of at least 200 but less than 215 percent of poverty receive a 75 percent scholarship. Those with at least 215 but not more than 230 percent get 50 percent.

Academic transparency:

Publicly discloses the standardized test score gains of schools with at least 30 scholarship students in grades 3-10 (who have prior-year scores from same school).

Financial accountability:

Requires a financial report from a certified accountant for any school with at least \$250,000 in scholarship funds the previous year.

Tax credit sources:

Adds three new sources to the base of dollar-for-dollar state tax credits: alcoholic beverage excise tax, direct-pay self-accrual sales tax, and the oil and gas severance tax. The existing two are the corporate income and insurance premium tax.

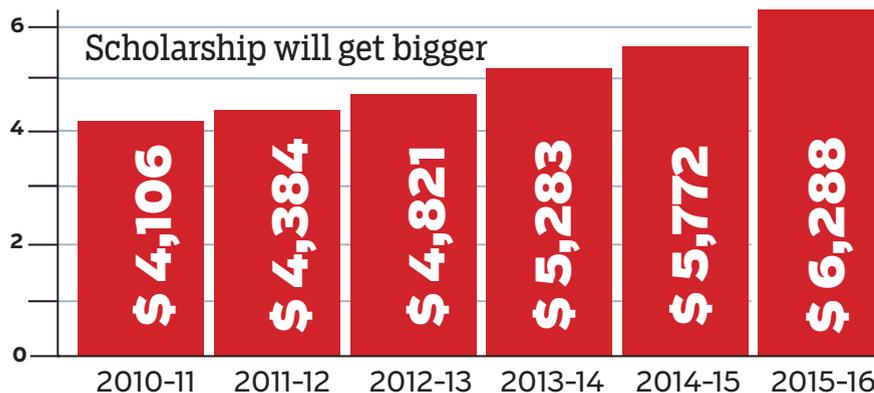
This is the official newsletter for Step Up For Students, published four times a year.

About Step Up For Students:

Our mission is to help alleviate the enormous educational challenges faced by children from low-income and working class families.



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These are projections; the actual amount will depend on each year's state education budget.

Donor Corner: Nelnet Business Solutions



FACTS Management Company and Nelnet Business Solutions, serving many Florida private and faith-based K-12 schools, has contributed \$600,000 to Florida's Step Up For Students scholarship program-enough to fund more than 150 scholarships for low-income students.

"The partnership with Step Up For Students helps us to fulfill our educational mission by reaching out to Florida's most economically disadvantaged families with scholarships," said Tim Tewes, Nelnet Executive Director and FACTS President. "We have a responsibility as corporate custodians to invest in the education of our youth. Step Up For Students ensures that all students have access to the education that best meets their needs, regardless of financial circumstances. We are proud to be a part of that mission."

FACTS / Nelnet Business Solutions



serves many private and faith-based schools in Florida with a number of services including tuition management, financial needs assessment, enrollment management and donor management solutions. The Nebraska based company started with one school and 30 families. Today, they serve approximately 5,000 schools in all 50 states with over one and a half million families.

Since 2002, corporations such as Nelnet and FACTS Management Company have contributed over \$550 million to the Step Up For Students scholarship program. Today, those donations serve more than 27,000 students throughout Florida.

GRADUATION:

Step Up Scholars take home honors

In its eighth year under Florida law, the Step Up For Students scholarship graduated 472 students from 192 different private schools this spring. Two-hundred, thirty-nine were females and 233 were males. Forty-eight percent were black, 28 percent Hispanic, 16 percent were white. All of them deserve recognition for their accomplishment.

We share three of their stories here.



CLINTON ANDRADE
The Pine School
Stuart

The kind of life that Clinton Andrade has led doesn't often lend itself to happy endings. But two years after he left a children's shelter for a real home and a scholarship to a respected private school, he graduated as a scholar and an artist.

The transformation from foster child to college student has turned heads at The Pine School in Stuart, where history teacher William Hudgins helped him blossom. "Clinton Andrade," wrote Hudgins, "is a dynamic young man who has overcome more obstacles in his young life than any adult can possibly imagine. Since joining the student body, he has emerged as a student and a person of substance."



ADDISON SIMMS
Trinity Christian Academy
Jacksonville

As the Step Up For Students Scholarship completes its eighth year in Florida, Addison Simms is a reminder that success doesn't happen overnight. He entered the program the first year it began and leaves as an honors graduate on his way to the University of South Florida.

His academic resume speaks for itself: 3.9 grade point average, National Honor Society, Bright Futures Scholar, six hours college credit through dual enrollment, acceptance at multiple universities.

"Addison has always been a self-starter, and they are just such a welcoming school community," says his mother, Jennifer Simms. "They challenged him, and he liked to be challenged."



HEFZIBA ALONSO
Tampa Bay Christian Academy
Tampa

Hefziba Alonso left public school after fifth grade because her mother was worried about discipline in the local middle school. Seven years later, she has graduated as class valedictorian at Tampa Bay Christian Academy.

Along the way, she has dazzled her parents, her classmates and the faculty.

"Hefziba is just a great, great student who works very hard at the goals she sets for herself," says Ana Lopez, Tampa Bay's admissions officer. "She is wonderful academically and socially. Truly, everybody loves Hefziba."

Her personal accomplishments could also fill a yearbook. Hefziba was junior class president, senior class president, National Honor Science president, member of the National



IMPORTANT UPDATES ON SCHOLARSHIP AMOUNTS IN THIS ISSUE.

STEP UP GRADUATES continued

CLINTON ANDRADE

Clinton was born in Hawaii to a mother with drug issues and a father in trouble with the law. He and his brothers were soon dispatched to live with an aunt. After the mother remarried and moved to Key West, they moved in with her again. But a teacher kept seeing wounds and called state child welfare authorities, who in turn removed the boys from the home. Foster homes split them apart, and Clinton ended up in a children's shelter for more than a year. That's when Timothy Rowe and Pine School came into his life.

Rowe took in Clinton first as a foster child and later as his adopted son. "He was spiraling downward in his public school because he didn't study, and no one paid attention," Rowe says. "I concluded he needed more structure and higher academic expectations."

Clinton entered Pine School as a junior with a Step Up For Students scholarship available to all foster children, and initially struggled to adapt to a new academic pace and a heavy homework load. By the second quarter, though, the Ds he made in his previous school had become As and Bs. He established himself as an accomplished writer and orator, and he became quickly known for his artistry, a love since childhood. His drawing adorned the homecoming T-shirts.

In his junior year, Clinton won the school's "Community Award." By his senior year, he earned a "Patriot Scholarship" to help fill the gap between the scholarship and Pine School tuition. At graduation, he won the "Spirit Award."

This fall, Clinton will attend Flagler College in St. Augustine, where he will combine two interests – art and sign language. He has studied sign language since his early teen years, and wants to be able to teach art to deaf children.

ADDISON SIMMS

The teachers took an interest in him, and he took an interest in them."

Addison has attended Trinity Christian Academy in Jacksonville on scholarship since the fifth grade. He still remembers why his mother, then divorced, decided to switch him from the public school he attended in fourth grade. "I think I must have had five teachers in one year," he says now. "We had teachers leave, and then they kept switching up the classes."

At Trinity, Addison says he found structure and discipline, both of which he came to value. As he made his way to high school, he became absorbed in history and English and political science. He tutored other students in the school. He made lasting relationships and was voted homecoming king. He was also a star soccer player on the academy, but remembers that his mother always kept him focused on academics.

"You come home from a soccer game and you might be tired and want to go to sleep, but you know you have to your homework no matter what," Addison says. "I didn't want to disappoint my mom."

Since he was young, Addison has been attracted to government and political history. He received partial scholarship offers from places like Marquette University and Regis College, but decided to go to USF in part because of the Bright Futures Scholarship. He already knows he wants to major in political science, and his goal is to become involved in policy at the federal level, to help shape political debate and helps others make their voices heard in government.

HEFZIBA ALONSO

Honor Society, Mu Alpha Theta honors math society. She ended up as valedictorian with a 4.42 grade point average and 21 college credits through dual enrollment at Hillsborough Community College.

"Hefziba really does give it her best effort, but she doesn't stress out," says Alejandra Alonso, her mother. "What I like is that the teachers there are so motivating and make learning fun."

Alejandra and her husband are missionaries, which is rewarding work that also leaves the family without the resources to afford the school that ended up serving their daughter so well. She turned to Step Up For Students, then known in Tampa as Florida P.R.I.D.E., and the scholarship has made it possible for all seven years.

Hefziba thinks the school's family atmosphere and caring teachers were ingredients to her success. "The teachers all knew me since I was little," she says. "I think I always had the mindset of doing your best. If you want to see something happen, you just have to step up and get it done."

Hefziba's mother is from Mexico and her father from Cuba, and the entire family has always traveled on missions to places like Central America, the Philippines, Canada and across the United States. Hefziba speaks fluent Spanish herself, and is fascinated by other nations and cultures. After missionary work this summer in Mexico, she plans to finish her associate degree in one year at HCC and then pursue a degree in international relations at the University of Tennessee. She sees herself one day serving as an ambassador.