Program Bridges Gap Between Teachers and Parents

As a new school year begins across Florida, 10 Tampa schools are joining an experiment to bring parents and teachers closer together. The pilot project, which includes what Step Up For Students is calling a “Learning Compact,” is intended to spur scholarship parents and schools to communicate throughout the year on ways to keep each student on track.

“My teachers have recognized the need to partner with parents to better educate their sons and daughters,” says Michael Zelenka, principal at Incarnation Catholic School, which includes roughly 50 Step Up scholarship students. “This project has forced our school to evaluate the ways in which we work with, communicate to, and enlist the help of our parents. We look forward to implementing the compact and using it as a way to help our students achieve excellence.”

The Learning Compact is being directed by Carol Thomas, a former teacher, administrator and area superintendent in Pinellas public schools who has a Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction and teaches graduate level courses in education policy. Thomas is now the vice president of the Office of Student Learning at Step Up For Students.

“We’re trying to help our schools refine the ways they interact with parents so that we can open the door to a true parent partnership,” Thomas says. “The Learning Compact brings everyone to the table to work toward the academic, social and behavioral progress of every student.”

Thomas already has led 93 training sessions at the participating schools and found overwhelming support from principals and teachers. In fact, the schools asked to use the Learning Compact with all students, not just those receiving Step Up scholarships. The compact will describe specific academic goals and benchmarks for each student and will require follow-up and consultation between the parent and teacher throughout the year. A computer program is being designed to provide color codes to indicate whether a student is struggling in a particular skill or has mastered it.

The pilot schools also will be working with the California-based Khan Academy, which has established an international reputation for more than 3,000 online video tutorials in mathematics, science, social studies and art history. Khan signed an agreement with Step Up that will establish monitoring tools for teachers in a learning process that is known as the “flipped classroom.” The approach is to introduce students to a new math concept through an online tutorial they can view at home, and then to use the classroom as a place where students can practice the skill and get individual attention from the teacher.

Though the Khan Academy has instituted a similar partnership with public schools in California and the District of Columbia, the Step Up partnership represents the first time it has worked with private schools. Khan tutorials are free for any student and are available at www.khanacademy.org.

Even as the compact opens in 10 schools this fall, Thomas is already getting ready to train 20 more and, if the pilot proves successful, will look ultimately to expand it to key schools throughout the state. The 10 pilot schools, which include more than 600 Step Up scholarship students, are: American Youth Academy, Bible Truth Ministries School, Faith Outreach Christian School, Gateway Christian Academy, Harvest Time Christian School, Incarnation Catholic School, Mount Calvary SDA School, St. Peter Claver Catholic School, Tampa Adventist Academy and Tampa Bay Christian Academy.
The skies were bright, but the smiles of school children were brighter on a cheerful day in May at the Southeastern Guide Dog headquarters in Palmetto, Fla. Here, 22 students and their teachers from Manatee Learning Academy in Bradenton filed off a bus and soon were in the paws of guide dogs in training. It wasn’t clear whether the “Puppy Hugging” and playing session was more exciting for the kindergarteners and first-graders or the 8-week-old puppies. The Southeastern Guide Dogs hosted the event celebrating the new partnership between Kemper Corporation (NYSE: KMPR) and Step Up For Students. All of the students in attendance were Step Up For Students scholars. As the friendly Labrador retrievers, golden retrievers and goldadores, a mixture of Labradors and golden retrievers, were released from their large kennels, you could see the delight in both theirs and the children’s eyes, as well as those of the Kemper representatives. The field trip to the Southeastern Guide Dogs facility was also a lesson in volunteerism for the students. Inside the special puppy-hugging room, the puppies’ ears flopped as they frolicked, played tug-a-war with a favorite toy or jumped into the arms of the youngsters. Tails whipped back and forth in delight.

Puppy hugging is just one of the methods Southeastern Guide Dog trainers use to socialize the puppies. The group also toured the beautiful 23-acre campus, meeting older guide dogs-in-training and learning how they will aid those who are visually impaired. One young girl who was fearful of dogs and had never pet one, found the courage to stroke her first dog. Her look of pride after came in the form of an ear-to-ear grin.

But the pivotal moment of the day was when Mark Williams, Tampa office District Manager for United Insurance Co., one of Kemper Corporation’s Home Service Companies, presented a $100,000 check representing their dollar-for-dollar tax credit contribution to the Step Up For Students Scholarship Program. This contribution will provide more than 22 scholarships for children from low-income families throughout the state.

Kemper is one of the nation’s leading financial services providers specializing in property and casualty insurance and life and health insurance. The company also has a strong commitment to community service. Through the company’s Community Trust Bank Program, each regional office chooses a local nonprofit organization to support throughout the year in the form of financial resources and volunteer service hours from employees. As part of that program, Williams announced during the May event that, in addition to their support of Step Up For Students, Kemper donated $250 to Southeastern Guide Dogs.

“At Kemper Corporation, we see the value in building the communities where we do business by giving back,” Williams said. “Volunteering is a part of our company culture, and we believe it benefits not only the community, but our employees as well. That is why we joined Step Up For Students. We are positively affecting children by helping their families select the best learning environment for their unique needs.”

In July, just seven months into the 2012 fundraising season, the maximum amount of tax credit contributions allowed to the Step Up For Students Scholarship Program was reached even before the new school year began. This “remarkable achievement” represents the most pledges received in the shortest amount of time in the history of the scholarship program, said Debbie Woerner, Step Up’s executive vice president of development.

“Our sincere gratitude goes to the corporations that demonstrated new or renewed resolve to provide quality education to low-income children in Florida through their financial commitments,” Woerner said. “Their combined contributions will provide tens of thousands of scholarships for underprivileged children, significantly enhancing their education and laying out a roadmap for a successful future.”

Reaching the $229 million cap was an important milestone, Woerner added. It solidified Step Up For Students’ ability to enroll an anticipated 50,000 low-income children into the scholarship program for the 2012-13 school year. It also secures the opportunity to expand Step Up’s funding as of Jan. 1, 2013, through an automatic cap increase to $286.2 million. This expansion is made possible, she said, through legislation that provides an increase of 25 percent following a fiscal year in which corporate contributions to the scholarship exceed 90 percent of the maximum contribution allowance.

“We encourage any potential donors who unfortunately may have been locked out this year to apply early in 2013,” Woerner said. “We will need your generous support as we begin the task of reaching our next goal of $286 million.” The corporate community has been a key to the success and growth of the scholarship program.

“We thank each and every one of our donors for their support as we continue to provide educational opportunities to Florida’s children,” said Woerner.

“Since 2002, the generosity of Step Up For Students’ corporate donors has given Florida’s low-income families an opportunity to choose the educational setting that best suits their children’s needs. As Step Up For Students celebrates its 10th anniversary, the company’s leaders recognize the corporations that have collectively funded more than 265,000 scholarships over the years. One such corporation is Brown & Brown Insurance, a founding donor that has demonstrated its commitment to Florida’s children through its support of Step Up For Students since 2002.

Since the scholarship program’s inception, Brown & Brown Insurance has donated every year with contributions totaling $11 million. The company’s combined contributions over the years have provided more than 2,869 scholarships for low-income children throughout the state.

“At Brown & Brown Insurance, we are proud to participate in a program that gives expanded educational opportunities to Florida’s children,” said company President and CEO J. Powell Brown. “Over the years, we have witnessed the positive impact Step Up For Students is making, and look forward to continuing to be a part of the program’s success.”

Brown & Brown Insurance is one of the largest independent insurance intermediaries in the nation, continually operating for more than 70 years. Headquartered in Daytona Beach and Tampa, they offer a variety of insurance and reinsurance products and services to a diverse client base.
SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT
Our Lady of the Holy Rosary-St. Richard Catholic School

As a child, Carlos Naumann never imagined that as an adult he would end up right where he began: Our Lady of the Holy Rosary-St. Richard Catholic School. But he wouldn’t have it any other way. “It’s incredible,” said the school’s principal, who went from kindergarten through eighth grade at the Miami-area school. “Part of me feels like I’m part of the building.”

After continuing his Catholic education and receiving his bachelor’s degree from Florida International University and a master’s from Barry University, he landed a teaching position at the school that gave him his educational foundations, and he quickly rose to principal.

His passion for the school is obvious when he speaks and his eyes shine.

“I love this place,” he said, sitting behind his desk in his school office. “I’ve seen a lot of history and I’m able to share this with the new families.”

Originally named Our Lady of The Holy Rosary School, it was opened in 1959 with a mission to provide a “superior Catholic education with a strong academic foundation.” The Sisters of St. Joseph are the founding administrators of the school run by the Archdiocese of Miami, but sisters no longer teach there. Children can attend pre-K through eighth grade at the school (Step Up doesn’t apply to pre-K) and tuition is $6,750 for Kindergarten through fifth and $6,950 for sixth through eighth grades. The school measures academic success with the Iowa Test of Basic Skills.

When it was first built there was not much around the church campus on Franjo Road in the town of Cutler Bay, once called Cutler Ridge. Naumann said he has heard stories about students from long ago who commuted to school by paddling their canoes up a nearby canal. The area was devastated by Hurricane Andrew in 1992 and many of the school’s students’ families, including Naumann’s, lost their homes, and some never returned to the area.

But through the years, the area around Our Lady of the Holy Rosary School and Church has grown, bringing a range of socioeconomic classes from low-income to extremely wealthy to campus. The school and church community itself grew when it unified with another local church, St. Richard’s Parish in Palmetto Bay, in 2011. This gives the school, which now recognizes both churches in its name, its most valued characteristic, said Naumann: diversity.

The most obvious times to see this diversity is when the students come together each Wednesday for Mass.

“I'm looking around and it's really a prime example of the Catholic Church. We have many ethnicities. It's truly beautiful. It's just a lovely way to coexist,” he said.

On campus, Naumann said, there are no barriers between race, culture or socioeconomic means. They embrace their different backgrounds annually during their school’s Heritage Day in October with dance, song, lessons and prayer.

Naumann describes the overall experience of Catholic education, and his school specifically, this way: “It’s a holistic education. The kids grow in faith, learn to be good citizens and successful academically,” he said. “It sticks with you. It’s just a core, basic thing you can go back to and it helps with life challenges.”

Test scores arrive again for Step Up students: Two thumbs up

School marketing tools are only a click away
Anthony Hamilton / Liberty Christian Academy / Tavares

Anthony said he was shocked to discover that all school cultures aren’t the same as what he had experienced all of his life. He feels like he fits in at Liberty Christian Academy.

“The kids are accepting of different people,” he said.

So much so, Anthony, who has always excelled academically, was chosen as vice president of his school’s National Honor Society chapter.

“It’s a challenge, but I think I’m ready to step up and rise to the occasion,” Anthony said of the position. “I think I can really be a standout.”

Liberty Christian Administrator Debi Zischke said Anthony’s experience is typical at the school and she credits her welcoming students for that.

“They love new friends and they want to see them succeed,” she said.

She remembered Anthony’s first year.

“He came kind of quiet and then he came to fit in,” she said.

“He’s very proud of himself. He has a lot more self-confidence,” Lisa said.

Liberty Christian Academy

Liberty Christian Academy in Tavares, Fla., was founded by the Liberty Baptist Church in 1987 and serves students from prekindergarten to 12th grade. The school’s core mission is “to train the whole student, academically, socially and spiritually.” Liberty Christian has approximately 172 students, of which 65 receive Step Up for Students scholarships. Tuition is $4,500, and Liberty Christian Academy gauges students’ progress by administering the Stanford Achievement Test (Stanford 10).

Liberty Christian is accredited by the Florida Association of Christian Colleges and Schools (FACCS).