



Legislators consider tax credit scholarship expansion

Florida House Speaker Will Weatherford in January called for a “massive expansion” of the Tax Credit Scholarship, and lawmakers are expected to make a decision before their annual session ends on May 2. The benefits to participating families and private schools could be extensive.

“We’re so grateful to the Speaker for finding ways to strengthen this scholarship and help students who have tremendous needs,” said Doug Tuthill, president of Step Up For Students, the nonprofit that administers the state-supported scholarship. “What he’s proposing will open the doors to so many other children who just need another school option.”

Enrollment in the program has tripled in the past six years, with the scholarship this year serving 59,674 low-income students in 1,414 participating schools. Still, thousands of families are being shut out, including roughly 34,000 students who started applications for the



Florida House Speaker Will Weatherford called for an expansion of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship

current year and did not receive a scholarship.

The bill filed in the House would boost the statewide cap on tax credits by roughly \$30 million next year, allowing as many as 75,000 students to receive scholarships. In fact, through a combination of current law and proposed changes, the cap could climb from \$286.2 million to \$730 million over the next four years, enabling the scholarship program to serve roughly 120,000 students.

Other changes the Legislature is considering include:

- **Larger scholarship.** The scholarship this year is \$4,880 and is already projected to increase in the fall to about \$5,280. The original House bill would allow the scholarship to reach 84 percent of the public school per-student operational amount in 2016-17, which translates to roughly \$6,100.

- **Partial scholarships for higher income families.**

The original bill provides partial scholarships to new and renewal students whose household income exceeds 200 percent of poverty, or \$47,700 for a household of four. Those students would be eligible in 2016-17 for at least a 50 percent scholarship as long as their income does not exceed 260 of poverty, or \$62,010 for a household of four.

- **No more prior-year requirements for low-income students.** The House bill would remove entirely, for students who qualify for free- or reduced-priced lunch, the requirement that they must have attended a public school the year prior to receiving a scholarship.

- **Help for foster children.** Foster children are automatically eligible for the scholarship. The bill would allow them to apply at any time during the year and to keep their scholarship if they are adopted.

- **Let retailers contribute.** The bill would add a sixth source for tax-credited contributions – the sales tax – to allow retailers to participate in the program.

Application season for 2014-15 school year is in full swing

The 2014-15 application season is now live for all families. Since October, Step Up For Students has been accepting applications from renewal families and, in February, began accepting applications from new families.

By late February, 30,000 scholarships had been awarded for the upcoming school year.

Those families who have not yet renewed for the 2014-15 school year are urged to do so as soon as possible. Scholarships are awarded on a first-come, first-served basis with renewal families having priority. Step Up, however, cannot hold scholarships for renewing families who have not applied or have not submitted all of the required documents.

“We are expecting a record number of scholarships to be awarded for the 2014-15 school year, so the earlier families apply the more likely they will receive an award letter before the school year begins,” said Anne White, Step Up vice president of operations.

This year’s opening of renewal applications in October was the earliest ever for Step Up and it has been deemed a success. The goal in part was to align awards with enrollment time at private schools.

“We are so impressed with the response to opening the application season early for renewals that we plan to open in the fall every year,” said White. “Thank you to all of the families who acted so quickly. If you are in the process of applying, please remember to check your email and phone messages frequently. Since last year, we’ve begun emailing, using automated calls and text messaging applicants to move the application process along.”

Step Up no longer sends hardcopy letters to families’ homes, White said. All application updates are sent to families in an electronic form. Those families whose email addresses or cellphone numbers have changed should notify Step Up immediately with updated information.

Step Up is still in touch with current school year scholarship families. The third scholarship payment for the 2013-14 school year was mailed out in February. Parents and guardians who have not already signed their scholarship checks must visit their child’s private school to sign the checks as soon as possible. The fourth and final payment of the 2013-14 school year will go out in May.

KEEPING TRACK: The Florida Legislature is scheduled to meet until May 2, and you can keep track of the progress of the Tax Credit Scholarship legislation online at Step Up For Students: <http://www.stepupforstudents.org/2014-legislature>.

Success Partners, a free program, brings together schools, students and families

More than 130 Step Up partner schools have already joined the organization’s Success Partners, a free program designed to support school administrators and teachers in leading students to academic success. And now the program is looking to expand into even more of Step Up’s 1,600 scholarship partner schools.

“Our goal is to support your school in creating strong family-school partnerships, which will positively impact the academic achievement of your students,” said Carol Thomas, the program’s primary developer and Step Up For Students vice president for the Office of Student Learning.

The Success Partners initiative is grounded in research that validates the importance of productive, positive family-school partnerships and recognizes the critical role a parent or guardian plays in the success of the child, Thomas explained.

“As members of the Success Partners network, school teachers and leaders will be exposed to current research and best practice in the areas of school culture, productive parent engagement and building and sustaining effective family-school partnerships through systemic, face-to-face training,” she said.

Schools that join the Success Partners network will be trained by members of the Step Up staff on how to implement the Learning Compact, a proprietary web-based program allowing educators to track each student’s progress and document what each student is expected to learn during the year. The compact also offers strategies to achieve established learning objectives and helps teachers, parents and students define their responsibilities. “Most importantly, the Learning Compact has been designed to support

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4



A Member of the Tokio Marine Group

When Philadelphia Insurance Companies founder James J. Maguire, Sr. first started selling insurance in the early 1960s, he decided to target a niche market.

"He started selling life insurance to the deaf community, an underserved community," said company spokesman Bill Procopio. "And he continued with niche markets."

It became a formula for success that has kept the company going strong for more than half a century. Philadelphia Insurance Companies (PHLY) is now 1,600 employees strong with 48 offices across the country.

"It also starts with a good foundation and leadership," Procopio said about the company's longevity. "And through those five decades, we went through lots of innovations and services that have helped us build our company."

Founded in 1962, the Bala Cynwyd, Pa.-based company designs, markets and underwrites commercial property/casualty and professional liability insurance products incorporating value-added coverages and services for select industries, such as personal fitness trainers, fitness studios, golf courses, and amateur sports leagues and camps. PHLY is also one of the largest insurance providers for the nonprofit community, including private schools.

With that background and the history of reaching out to the underserved, PHLY naturally became a contributor to the Step Up For Students Scholarship Program in 2010 and has since donated \$4 million, providing scholarships for about 900 underprivileged low-income students. The company has also recently pledged \$1 million for 2014.

"A significant part of our culture is to give back, not to mention that our business provides insurance to nonprofits and schools and child-care institutions," Procopio said of the partnership. "It's a great opportunity for us to marry our culture and our business."

Through its philanthropic initiative known as TEAMPHLY, Philadelphia Insurance Companies has contributed more than \$14 million to charitable organizations since 1980.

"We support a wide range of charities, but our primary focus is with organizations that are focused on education, the environment, and the health and wellness of children," Procopio said. "The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program is really a win-win for companies and families and children, so being able to increase educational options for kids is really a great match."

Step Up For Students President Doug Tuthill said the scholarship program is honored and grateful to be among the organizations PHLY supports.

"With the commitment of companies like Philadelphia Insurance, Step Up has been able to continue to extend educational options to the very students who need it most here in Florida. Thankfully, we have been able to increase the number of scholarships awarded to low-income students each year and that couldn't be done without our donors' generous contributions."



Kemper Home Service Companies, a Step Up donor, sponsored an event at the Lutheran Social Services Food Bank in Jacksonville on Feb. 20 to encourage volunteerism. Step Up scholar Wrené Wright, left, St. Patrick's Catholic School Principal Mary Martin, center, and Sarah Alaydi, also a Step Up scholar, were part of the group of 15 students and educators from the school who sorted food for distribution.

DONOR UPDATE

The 2013-14 program cap of \$286 million was reached in record time last year. With the opening of the 2014-15 program, many corporations have already pledged their enthusiastic support to Step Up For Students. As of February 15, corporations had reserved \$78.9 million of the expanded cap of \$357 million. These commitments endorse the corporate community's desire to provide a personalized education to Florida's underserved students.

It is with grateful appreciation that Step Up For Students recognizes corporations that have demonstrated a new or renewed commitment to Step Up. (Jan. 1 – Feb. 15).

-Debbie Woerner,
Executive Vice President of Development
Step Up For Students

Companies: Claim your tax credit

If your company has enrolled in the Step Up For Students Scholarship Program this year and has not yet notified us, please let us know so that we can extend our gratitude to you and assist your company with taking the necessary steps to receive your tax credits, including the required certificate of contribution for your tax returns. If your company has not yet notified us of your pledge, please do so by e-mailing Debbie Woerner at dwoerner@sufs.org.

ABC Fine Wine and Spirits, Inc.
 American Traditions Insurance Company
 Ark Royal Insurance Company
 BAC Florida Bank
 Brown & Brown, Inc.
 CenterState Bank of Florida, NA
 Citizens First Bank
 Denny's, Inc.
 Double Eagle Distributing
 Goldring Gulf Distributing
 Gulfstream Property and Casualty Insurance Company
 Health Care Service Corporation,
 a Mutual Legal Reserve Company
 Humana, Inc.
 Johnson & Johnson
 Modern USA Insurance Company
 Philadelphia Insurance Companies
 Republic National Distributing Company, L.L.C.
 Rosen Hotels & Resorts
 Saddle Creek Corporation
 Sonic, America's Drive-In
 Southern Wine and Spirits of America, Inc.
 Sunshine State Insurance Company
 The Container Store
 The Lewis Bear Company
 Urban Trust Bank
 Uretak Holdings, Inc.
 Value Pawn, an EZCORP Company
 Walgreen Co.
 Waste Management
 Westcor Land Title Insurance Company
 Westfield Insurance

Gold Coast Eagle Distributing hosts scholarship information session

Lisa Sirgany had never considered sending her three daughters to private school until she went to an information session on Feb. 27 in Sarasota to learn more about Step Up For Students.

But now she has high hopes of sending all three girls, including the youngest who will start kindergarten in August, to school closer to their Sarasota home, instead of driving them to a charter school in Bradenton that her fifth- and seventh-grade girls now attend.

"I'm excited because we never could have afforded private school. My kids are very smart and if they can get the (financial) help to go to private school, and be closer to home, that



Lisa Sirgany gets help from Step Up's Jeff Giese during the Gold Coast Eagle event.

would be great."

As an extension of Gold Coast Eagle Distributing's partnership with Step Up For Students, the Sarasota-based distributing company wanted to help spread the word about scholarships for the 2014-15 school year, and provide a way for non-participating schools to learn how to begin accepting scholarship students. About two dozen parents, children, educators and community activists turned out to learn about the Tax Credit Scholarship Program, ask

questions and, for some, begin their applications online.

"We want to touch everyone we possibly can, and we want to get the word out there about Step Up," Hugh Shields, Gold

Coast Eagle marketing manager, told the crowd. "It's a great, great program, and it's a way for us to give back to the community."

Since 2012, Gold Coast has donated \$6.8 million to Step Up, providing scholarships to 1,456 low-income students, and company leaders say they want to continue helping spread the word to families in Sarasota and Manatee counties, near their company base.

"We are honored to partner with a company that goes the extra mile to spread the word about our scholarship program," Step Up For Students Vice President of Operations Anne White said before the event. "We are grateful for Gold Coast Eagle's generous contributions that will help hundreds of students, as well as their community outreach efforts."

During the 2013-14 school year, about 800 students in Sarasota and Manatee counties benefited from a Step Up scholarship, and 37 schools in the counties served Step Up scholars.

SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT

Abundant Life Christian Academy

When the Cuban Assemblies of God Choir began visiting Abundant Life Christian Academy in Margate, Fla., a couple of years ago, something struck a chord with Principal Stacy Angier. In fact, students and faculty alike became quite enamored with the group as they listened to them sing and share stories about life in Cuba.

Angier, who is always looking for hands-on and innovative ways to teach her 380 students, had an idea. "Let's do Cuba," she said.

Daniel Irizarry, whose young sons attend Abundant Life, happens to be a missionary for Assemblies of God and travels to Cuba frequently. He assisted in the arrangements from securing the religious mission visa to setting up lodging and church connections. Then, he along with his wife, Therese, traveled with the school group. It took nearly a year of planning, including an after-school program for the eight students selected to travel to Cuba from Dec. 16 through Dec. 20, 2013, Angier said.

The students read books as part of the trip preparation and studied a manual that Therese Irizarry created for the children, which was filled with history, geography, agriculture and more. The students were tested on what they learned and read. On other occasions, they listened to speakers who had fled the communist country. They also did community outreach at local churches to prepare for the missionary aspect of the trip.

"It was all with the purpose of the kids having some knowledge of Cuba, the history and develop some sort of relationship for the country so when they got there they had an understanding for the land," Angier said about the extra academic work.

Additionally, the students held fundraisers to help cover the cost of the \$1,720-per-person trip.

Step Up scholar and eighth-grader Hannah Citelli, 14, was one of the students to travel to Cuba. She said at first juggling the work with her regular academics and responsibilities was a challenge, but in the end it paid off.

"I'm glad that I went on the trip. It was a good learning experience," she said. "I think it made me more mature to face these things. The people in Cuba, they are so nice. They are so content with what they have, so it gave me a bigger appreciation for what I have now."

After the 45-minute flight to travel 90 miles off the coast of Florida, Hannah said she was immediately stunned by what she saw as they traveled away from the airport. As they rode deeper into Havana, she noticed

the streets were flooded with people, some carrying unwrapped loaves of bread, and the few cars that were on the road, they appeared old and rusty. The sidewalks and streets were broken and plagued by potholes. Emaciated dogs roamed the streets and even walked on rooftops. The missionary group of about 18 students, parents and teachers, passed few stores and never spotted a grocery store. Many of buildings they saw were dilapidated at best.

"I saw children. Just children, walking down the streets and they didn't have anyone with them sometimes, and I thought, 'How can people live like that?'" said Hannah.

Abundant Life teacher Loretta Camacho used to be one of those children. She was only 13 when her mother passed away from an illness in Havana, and she and her two siblings, a brother a year older and a sister seven years her junior, began living on their own. She was born in New York, but as a child returned to Cuba with her mother. Her father was still living in New York. She was nearly 18 when she was reunited with him back in the United States. The school trip was the first time she had returned to Cuba in 45 years.

"It was sad. The area where I used to live was almost destroyed," Camacho said of the once nice neighborhood in Havana. "It was bad. It looked like a bomb had hit it."

Camacho said she didn't know what to expect, but certainly didn't expect that. Her trip, she said, was bittersweet. "I'm very glad I went back," Camacho said. "I realized a piece of my heart is there."

The more uplifting part of her trip was watching Abundant Life students learn and grow as they visited churches, painted a Sunday school classroom and even played soccer with Cuban children. Some of the children donated their cleats, shoes and clothes to children there. One student even donated his guitar to a church.

Angier enjoyed watching a transformation in the students as well.

"I would absolutely say it's a life-changing experience. They've come back with an attitude of appreciation. With more value not just for each other, but for the collective body of students here at Abundant Life."

Quick Facts about Abundant Life Christian Academy

- Located in Broward County
- 157 of its 380 students are Step Up scholars
- Serves pre-K to eighth grade
- Tuition is \$5,800 for kindergarten and up to \$6,600 for eighth grade for 2013-14 school year
- Uses the Stanford Achievement Test to measure academic success



Abundant Life Academy Step Up scholar Hannah Citelli, 14, was one of a group of 18 students, educators and parents from the school who traveled in December to Havana, Cuba on a religious mission. Here, she poses at Camera Obscura in Old Havana with the Capitol building in the background.

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

Malik Barton/Bradenton Christian School

Malik Barton was in middle school when his mother, who was facing life challenges, left him and his four siblings with his aunt Patricia Barton-Adams. Patricia didn't see her sister again for a few years, she said.

Patricia found herself raising seven kids instead of two: her older sister's three teenage sons and two daughters and her own two younger daughters.

Patricia saw it as her job to make sure the kids "did not fail" after they were left with her.

"I just knew I had to keep going," Patricia said. "My church family assured me that God had put this plan in place for a reason. The thing that motivated me every day was: We had to get to a better place. This cannot be the end. I don't want them ending up on the streets."

Malik and his siblings were having problems in their new neighborhood schools. Malik said he would talk back to his teachers in his middle school classes, and Patricia recalled him getting into arguments with them.

Additionally, Malik said he required more assistance to overcome his academic challenges. He wasn't the only one going through a tough period. Teachers told Patricia that Malik's older

brothers in high school weren't doing their school work. Patricia said they would end up in detention and would show up to school without identification badges, which were required.

"They were in class, but weren't learning, and they were kind of withdrawn," she said.

Patricia's own daughters were also having difficulties.

That summer, Patricia, a single mother, was reading a form about the free- or reduced-school lunch program. At the bottom of the form, there was information about Step

Up For Students and a listing of area schools that accepted the scholarship. One of those was Bradenton Christian School.

She applied for the scholarship, and all seven kids were granted scholarships and started attending Bradenton Christian at the beginning of the 2009-10 school year.

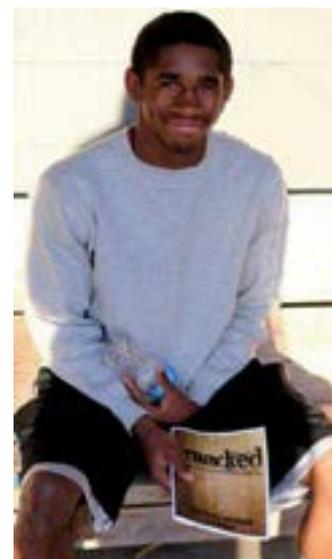
Patricia currently works for the YMCA in Bradenton but used to run an in-home daycare. She had to give that up when her household grew to seven kids. She would not have been able to afford to send the kids to Bradenton Christian without the help of Step Up, she said.

Patricia noticed positive changes in the kids as they attended their new school. The teenagers started turning in their schoolwork. And the students benefited from the teacher support in their new classrooms, as did Patricia. Teachers called her when they had concerns and even scheduled parent-teacher conferences for multiple kids on the same day to streamline the process for Patricia.

Malik, who was in the eighth grade when he started at Bradenton Christian, said he enjoyed the extra help and attention he got from his new teachers. Part of that was due to smaller class sizes. While his prior school had classes with more than 20 students, Bradenton Christian's classrooms averaged about 15 students, he said. He got to know his teachers better, and respect for them blossomed.

"I just became a nicer person," he said.

Now 18 and in his senior year at Bradenton Christian, Malik said he practically knows everybody at the school. He also has tutored some of the younger students, and his favorite subjects are math



CONTINUED ON PAGE 4



APPLICATION ALERT:

2014-15 Applications are NOW OPEN For ALL Families.

Remember scholarships are awarded on a first-come, first-served basis with renewal families having priority. Apply now at www.StepUpForStudents.org.

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."

SUCCESS PARTNERS FROM PAGE 1

collaboration and communication with our school families," said Thomas.

Thomas said the reason for this program is multifaceted, but includes the fact that parents have become savvy consumers of education opportunities and want to work closer with schools. Their children need educators' support to master today's rigorous standards in order to remain competitive in the global economy.

"In addition," Thomas said, "schools are being held accountable now more than ever for the academic success of each child, and they can't do it alone. They need to cultivate a culture of positive family engagement in order to have successful students."

This also helps bolster the merits of the Step Up For Students program.

"Supporters of the Tax Credit Scholarship Program expect scholarship students to be successful," Thomas said.

Being part of Success Partners also brings educators closer together, allowing them to share ideas with other professionals across the state. They also earn recertification points through the program and can take advantage of the ongoing support from an Office of Student Learning coordinator.

To learn more and to sign up for Success Partners, call (813) 402-0188.

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



About Step Up For Students:

Step Up For Students provides legislatively authorized K-12 scholarships and related support to give economically disadvantaged families the freedom to choose the best learning options for their children.

337 S. Plant Avenue, Tampa, Florida 33606
Phone: (866) 590-5364



<https://twitter.com/StepUp4Students>
<https://www.facebook.com/stepup4students>

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT FROM PAGE 3

and physics. He has gotten involved with extracurricular activities playing tight end for the football team, and he also got involved in drama productions, playing Sneezzy the dwarf in a version of "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs."

Malik wants to become a nurse or nurse practitioner.

"I always wanted to help people and make the world better," he said.

Patricia credits the positive changes in Malik at Bradenton Christian to the small class sizes, too, and the heart that teachers put into their jobs.

"They actually believe in what they're teaching," she said.

Malik wasn't the only one in the family to see benefits from Bradenton Christian. Malik's older brothers, for instance, also saw gains, from rising GPAs to rising athletic prowess to just growing maturity. The girls in the family benefited as well, thriving from the attention given by teachers and staff. They have participated in Key Club and the cheerleading team, as well as plays and musical performances.

Football coach and athletic director Alan Gerber coached Kenny, one of Malik's older brothers, and Malik during their time on the BCS Panthers football team and has known the family for many years.

"All of those young men have evolved into men of character," he said.

The coach says the two benefited from the stability Bradenton Christian provided and maintained good grades while they were enduring a dramatically changing home environment. Like others on the team, they helped younger students become better players and also helped with tutoring. He described them as "wonderful," "well-mannered" and "God-loving kids."

"Those kids I would trust with my own children," he said.

About Bradenton Christian School

Bradenton Christian School is a private Christian school in Bradenton that is accredited by Middle States & Christian Schools of Florida and holds accreditations or memberships with several other organizations. The school was founded in 1960 and teaches kids from preschool through 12th grade. It is the oldest private school in Manatee County. About 540 students are enrolled for the 2013-14 school year, including 88 Step Up For Students scholars. The average student-teacher ratio is 10:1 for preschool and 15:1 for elementary and secondary schools. The school offers honors and AP classes for its secondary school students and a dual enrollment program. The school's interscholastic sports program offers basketball, cheerleading, football, golf, baseball, softball, soccer, swimming, tennis, volleyball and track & field. The school uses the Iowa Test of Basic Schools annually to measure academic success.