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 supported scholarship. "What he’s proposing will open the doors to so many other children who just need another scholarship. "What he’s proposing will open the doors to so many other children who just need another scholarship. "What he’s proposing will open the doors to so many other children who just need another scholarship. "What he’s proposing will open the doors to so many other children who just need another scholarship. "What he’s proposing will open the doors to so many other children who just need another scholarship. "What he’s proposing will open the doors to so many other children who just need another scholarship. "What he’s proposing will open the doors to so many other children who just need another scholarship.

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 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 been 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.

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
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

DONOR UPDATE

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.
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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
Uretek Holdings, Inc.
Value Pawn, an EZCORP Company
Walgreen Co.
Waste Management
Westcor Land Title Insurance Company
Westfield Insurance

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.

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 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 200 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.
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.
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.”

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.

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SUCCESS PARTNERS FROM PAGE 1

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.

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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 Sneezy 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 schools 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.