



## School Choice Day draws more than 1,000 supporters to Tallahassee



Florida Education Commissioner Tony Bennett talks about the importance of school choice during the rally in Tallahassee on April 3.

**T**hey climbed aboard buses in the early hours of April 3 from all over Florida, but instead of arriving tired in Tallahassee, the students, parents and teachers arrived energized by the importance of their message, they said.

After creating signs at the Tallahassee-Leon County Civic Center, they proudly carried them with smiles on their faces and a mission as they marched up hill to the Capitol.

"What do we want?" leaders of the march yelled, walking through the cordoned-off streets

"School choice!" the supporters responded.

"And when do we want it?"

"Now!"

More than 1,000 school choice supporters in all rallied at the Capitol in an event that for the first time represented just about every school choice sector. The rally was coordinated by Florida Alliance for Choices in Education, which includes Step Up leaders, and the Florida chapter of the National Coalition for Public School Options. The rally came as the Legislature hit the mid-point in this year's session during which, more than 30 school choice bills were considered.

Parents and students came from magnet schools, career academies, virtual schools, charter schools, home schools and private schools that accept tax credit scholarships.

Among their messages: Options matter.

"I don't want to be forced to put my child anywhere," said Regina Davis, who boarded a bus at 3 a.m. to make the rally from Miami-Dade where she has three children in magnet schools.

In less than a generation, school choice in Florida has quietly gone mainstream, with 43 percent of students now attending a school other than their neighborhood school. This year alone, more than

200,000 parents chose magnet schools, at least 150,000 chose career academies, 200,000 chose charters, and 50,000 chose to send their kids to private schools with help from tax-credit scholarships.

Renee White, a teacher from Mt. Sinai Junior Academy in Orlando, which participates in the Step Up program, said the scholarships give low-income students an opportunity they didn't have before, but even private schools might not be right for all children.

"It's whatever works. It's whatever the parents choose. There are many good people in public schools. We're not discriminating. It's just a choice."

Politicians from both parties addressed the rally goers, many of whom wore yellow "School Choice Day" T-shirts.

Gov. Rick Scott said choice and competition will make schools better. Education Commissioner Tony Bennett said it amazed him that in a country founded on freedom, people opposed the freedom of parents to choose schools. State Rep. Janet Adkins, R-Fernandina Beach, said she would continue to fight for parity in funding for charter schools.

State Sen. Darren Soto, D-Kissimmee, said Florida has good schools of all stripes – traditional, charter and private. "And I think it's critical that folks in my district and others have many options to pursue their dreams," he said.

After the rally, yellow shirts swarmed the Capitol, looking for lawmakers.

On the 22nd floor, Rep. Linda Stewart, D-Orlando, met with more than a dozen students from Mt. Sinai Junior Academy. She mentioned the rally chants from the courtyard below.

"I could hear you on the 14th floor," she told them. And that's a good thing," she continued. "You can't be shy when you come to Tallahassee."

## Last-minute applicants must hurry for the 2013-14 school year

In the 2012-13 school year, more than 50,000 students were awarded a Step Up For Students Scholarship, and that number is well on its way to being surpassed for the 2013-14 school year. Since the application season opened for renewal families in February, and March for new families, more than 40,000 students have already been awarded a scholarship for the upcoming school year. "As always, our aim is to complete our review of applications before the school year begins, but this requires a team effort, and we need your help," said Anne White, Step Up's vice president of operation and human resources. Here are some ways parents can help speed up the application process:

- Apply immediately. Parents should visit [www.StepUpForStudents.org](http://www.StepUpForStudents.org) to complete the online application if they haven't already. Remember, scholarships are awarded on a first-come, first-serve basis.
- Check application status regularly. Parents can check the status of their application by visiting [www.StepUpForStudents.org](http://www.StepUpForStudents.org) and accessing their Step Up online account. In some cases, additional documents may be requested. By checking their status often, applicants will receive up-to-the-minute information on where their application is in the process, and be alerted if any additional information is needed.
- Submit supporting or requested documents immediately. When parents complete the application, a listing of supporting documents will display. These documents, combined with the successful payment of the application fee, are needed to begin the review of each application.

"We greatly appreciate the responsiveness of our applicants as it helps us process applications faster," White added. "In preparation for this application season, several enhancements have been made to help applicants get through the application process faster."

The enhancements, according to White, are:

- Document Upload. In addition to being able to fax or mail supporting documents, applicants are now able to upload their documents directly to their application, which enables their application to move immediately into processing. Instructions on how to upload documents can be found in the "Print and Send Documents" tab of the applicant's Step Up account.
- Multilingual communication. Both the online application and supporting document forms are available in English and Spanish. Additionally, Step Up's Contact Center can handle calls from applicants in English, Spanish and Creole.
- More methods of communication. In addition to information being available on Step Up's website, information is being shared with families through emails, automated phone calls and text messages.

**For any questions, call the Contact Center at 877-735-7837. The Contact Center is open Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 11 a.m. and noon to 6 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time. You may also email questions to [info@StepUpForStudents.org](mailto:info@StepUpForStudents.org).**

# DeVry, Olympic diver teach students the importance of STEM education

Two-time Olympic diver Chris Colwill is known for his strength and exceptionally high jumps, but it was science that ultimately helped him spring even higher from the board and improve his dives, he told a group of Faith Outreach Academy students in Tampa on Feb. 15.

Colwill, a Brandon, Fla. native who competed in the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing and was again on the 2012 U.S. Olympic diving team in London, spoke during the February STEM Career Assembly hosted by DeVry and Step Up For Students. At the event, more than 50 students, grades 7 – 12, learned the importance of STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education.

Sophomore Danjerrys Vazquez, one of 169 Step Up scholars



DeVry College and Career Champion, Carmen Gleason, left, Step Up scholar and Faith Outreach Academy sophomore Danjerrys Vazquez, and retired Olympic diver Chris Colwill, spoke during DeVry's STEM Career Assembly in February

at Faith Outreach, spoke during the event of how her life has changed since attending the school on scholarship.

"At Faith Outreach, I know that my teachers care about me, help me to understand the curriculum, and make sure I get all of my work done," she said. "They help me to focus on my weaknesses and make them my strengths."

DeVry, a global provider of educational services and the parent organization of higher learning institutions, including Ross University School of Medicine, Chamberlain College of Nursing and DeVry University, focuses on strengthening student learning as well. Its purpose is to empower its students to achieve their educational and career goals, but for DeVry, that mission begins long before students fill out college applications.

DeVry is also an official education provider to Team USA, and through that partnership, DeVry University has developed a dynamic presentation designed to introduce STEM and STEM careers to students. The STEM Career Assembly showcased how professionals educated in STEM fields helped provide behind-the-scenes logistics to athletic events shown around the world. With speakers, like Colwill, and a powerful video, students learned about nutritionists who developed diets for peak athletic performance, how footwear was designed differently for sprinters and runners, and how civil engineers are behind the Olympics infrastructure sometimes requiring demolition of buildings and construction of new ones. Students learned how these specialties could also translate into everyday careers from developing video games, designing cars and manufacturing cosmetics.

During the STEM Career Assembly, DeVry's college and career champion Carmen Gleason told students that while other industries have suffered tremendous losses in the workforce because of the weakened economy, STEM careers are projected to grow 7 percent faster than non-STEM jobs.

Colwell's story helped to bring the STEM facts and career opportunities to life. "I've been diving for 22 years and after 22 great years, I learned a lot about the sport," Colwill, now 28 and retired from the sport, told the crowd.

Once he lifted off the 3-meter spring board and was about 5 meters in the air, he had a lot to think about, he said. If it was a triple flip, he had to consider how he was going to complete it, or when working with a partner in synchronized dives, he had to ensure they were indeed in sync.

"As soon as I completed my rotation I had to look for the water, find a way to go into the water, as straight as I could, pain-free and with little splash," he explained. "After 22 years, I was still struggling with that. And also, I was known for my strength. I was able to jump high. I was able to jump higher than most people in my field."

But, he said, there was much more to diving than strength. He learned more about how his body works when he had the opportunity to work with scientists in Indianapolis, who used computers to monitor and study the Olympian's entire diving experience. "It was all really complex," he said. "The main reason why they were doing it was so they could test my muscle function. They would test me from the time I started walking to the board to the time I entered the water."

What Colwill learned surprised him: When he jumped on the board, despite being known for how much height he achieved, he wasn't using all his leg muscles.

"But sure enough, after they taught me how I could be a better jumper, it actually worked out for the best, because I was able to work on my weakest dives, jump higher, make it easier and do it well. Evidently, it improved my ranking in the diving industry," he said. "So it was all really cool...and these are ideas I am giving you to open up your eyes to see what else is out there."

## DONOR UPDATE

After reaching the 2012-13 program cap of \$229 million at a record pace last year, corporations have overwhelmingly begun the new year with enthusiastic support of Step Up For Students. Thankfully, the enthusiasm from our corporate donors is well matched for the expanded 2013-14 cap of \$286.25 million. Nearly \$80 million has been pledged during the first three months of the year—a healthy 172 percent increase when comparing dollars pledged during the same time period last year.

These commitments resoundingly demonstrate the corporate community's desire to provide quality, tailored educational opportunities to Florida's economically disadvantaged students.

It is with grateful appreciation that Step Up For Students recognizes these corporations that have demonstrated new or renewed resolve to Step Up.

– Debbie Woerner, Step Up's executive vice president for development

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### Donor Corner



Nicknaming his 1912 invention as the "theater in a suitcase," Dr. Herman DeVry was a budding motion picture technology engineer who was once best known for his invention of the Model E portable movie projector.

Today, his legacy is perhaps more closely tied to DeVry University, which grew from a technical school in Chicago to one of the largest degree-granting higher education systems in North America with more than 74,000 students enrolled in the United States and Canada.

DeVry continues to expand upon its founder's vision, by empowering students to achieve their educational and career goals through its educational institutions, including Chamberlain College of Nursing and American University of the Caribbean School of Medicine, that offer programs in business, healthcare, technology, accounting and finance.

But DeVry makes it a priority to invest its successes back into the community, according to Sharon Thomas Parrott, DeVry's senior vice president of external relations and global responsibility, and chief regulatory compliance officer. Simply put, "doing well by doing good" is a part of everyday life at DeVry institutions in the U.S. and abroad, Sharon Thomas Parrott said. (See Donor Event Spotlight on this page for a Step Up-DeVry partner event.)

This mantra led to DeVry's support of Step Up For Students in 2012. Scholarships for 100 low-income students were funded during the 2012-13 school year by DeVry's tax redirections to the Step Up program.

"We are grateful that DeVry is supporting our scholarship program," said Doug Tuthill, president of Step Up For Students. "We share the same goal of providing an educational background that leads to future successes."

Sharon Thomas Parrott shared a similar sentiment.

"DeVry supports educational and community initiatives that will help our next generation of workers succeed, paying close attention to those that increase access to underserved populations," she said. "Step Up scholars are the very same students we want to see go to college and succeed in their education and careers. DeVry is proud to support Step Up For Students in helping strengthen the transition from high school to college."

## COMPANIES: Claim Your Tax Credits

If your company has enrolled in the Step Up For Students 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. E-mail Debbie Woerner at [dwoerner@sufs.org](mailto:dwoerner@sufs.org).

– Debbie Woerner, Step Up's executive vice president for development

# SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT

## Basilica School of St. Paul

When Father Tim Daly began his work six years ago as the pastor at the Basilica of St. Paul in the inner city of Daytona Beach, he never dreamed that orchestrating a full marketing campaign would be one of his first tasks.

Daly wanted local low-income families to know there was financial help available to attend Basilica School of St. Paul, the parish school connected with the church, which serves children in kindergarten through eighth grade. The school began participating in the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program in the early years, but Daly knew many more families in the area could benefit from the program.

"There were a few students benefitting from the program at the Basilica School of St. Paul, and when we realized the potential help that the scholarship could offer for so many children, we began marketing the opportunity to the community," Daly said. "We saw that there was a great need in the inner city area of Daytona."

The school began getting the word out with television, radio, print and word-of-mouth advertising.

"Most people hadn't heard of the program, or didn't understand. It is confusing to explain where the money comes from," Daly said. "Some families whose children receive scholarships now still don't know where it comes from."

Step Up scholarships make it possible for Enrico and Felipe Paredes to attend the Basilica School of St. Paul. Their parents, Maria "Nanette" Gomez de la Torre and Cesar Paredes, who moved to the United States from Ecuador six years ago, both attended Catholic schools in their youth, and wanted the same opportunity for their sons.

"It was important to us to provide a faith-based education for our sons, so when we found out that there was help with tuition, we were so happy," said Nanette. "We are proud because we feel that we are giving our sons the best education."

Nanette says her family appreciates the small school environment.

"We feel that we are part of a family. For the kids, they feel welcome every day," she said.

It seems the Basilica School of St. Paul's marketing campaign certainly worked. The school now serves 186 students of which 95 are on the Step Up scholarship this year who otherwise would not have been able to afford the \$5,300 annual tuition at the private school.

"Because of the Step Up program and its funders, our retention rate has been very good," Daly said.

Additionally, Father Lopez High School, the local Catholic high school where Daly was the president before coming to Basilica School of St. Paul, now accepts the scholarship. Now the students can transition easily from his school to Catholic high school, he said.

"The school is truly integrated into the community," he said. "Not only do we work with the students, but we work closely with the parents, as well. It's like a family, and everyone is learning."



The Rev. Tim Daly, right, prepares to have a little fun swinging with the Paredes boys at Basilica School of St. Paul.



Taylor Barnes, left, then 7, performs in 2005, and then showing off her talents again at 14 in 2012.

## STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

Taylor Barnes / St. Petersburg Christian School

Listening to Taylor Barnes describe her interview experience at the Idyllwild Arts Academy in California, you would think she was talking about an exclusive performing arts university. She talks about touring the 200-acre campus nestled in the San Jacinto Mountains, the freshman dormitories and how she found out after her ballet audition that her performance shined bright enough to parlay her into a spot at the school for next fall. And she mentions, with a hint of a smile in her voice, that she was offered a \$45,750 scholarship.

But Taylor is just 15, and Idyllwild is a boarding high school.

"It was really exciting to take classes with the students there and see how talented they all are," said Taylor, who is currently finishing the eighth grade at St. Petersburg Christian School. "By the time they graduate high school, some of them have auditions with [dance] companies and schools like Juilliard."

While Taylor is definitely a standout at St. Petersburg Christian, her journey to the spotlight has been less than graceful at times.

Since Taylor was very young, her mother, Shannon Coates, wanted her daughter to have the very best education possible. She found out about Step Up For Students after being denied enrollment at all five neighborhood schools she had selected for her daughter in Pinellas County's school choice program. Eventually, Taylor, then 5 and battling severe asthma, was matched with a school 30 minutes away from their home. Shannon didn't want to be far away from her young daughter in case she had an attack.

Shannon applied for a Step Up scholarship, and Taylor began her educational journey at the Yvonne C. Reed Christian School in St. Petersburg. It was a great fit for her until the third grade, when Shannon realized Taylor

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## Schools and parents partner for student success with the help of Step Up

For more than a year now in her role as Step Up For Students president of Student Learning, Carol Thomas has not only been preaching to teachers and administrators that getting parents engaged in their children's education is a key component to students success, she's been teaching it. And the message - delivered to them in the form of a program called Success Partners - is being well received by educators.

"Success Partners recharged my vision and passion for parent-teacher relationships as a core value for our school," Jerry Frimmel, principal of Venice Christian School wrote in a review at the conclusion of the Train-the-Facilitator Retreat in October with Step Up.

Success Partners is a two-year professional development model offered at no cost to schools that accept Step Up scholars. Ten schools in Hillsborough County piloted this program during 2011, with 17 more schools that came aboard for the 2012-13 school year, and more than 100 joining for next year. The initiative is based on the benefits of strengthening the family-school partnership for the success of the child, explained Thomas, a former educator and administrator. Schools that work closely with parents often have high student achievement and quality

programs, she added.

"Where families and schools engage in productive partnerships, school morale, job satisfaction, the school's reputation, and community support improve," Thomas said. "As parents become partners in education, school staff acquires a better understanding of families' cultures and form deeper respect for parent's abilities and time. When parents are partners in education, communication and relationships between families and school staff is viewed as vital to student success."

Using a train-the-facilitator model, SUFS Office of Student Learning staff guide an administrator and a teacher leader through the experience of the 10 Success Partners modules. Participants experience the modules first as a learner, then as a leader or facilitator. It gives them the tools and materials needed to guide their school staff through the experience of examining structures, processes and conditions necessary to enhance current or develop additional parent engagement strategies unique to the school community.

Study and planning throughout the first year results in well-developed strategies for implementation during the second year, Thomas said. Using a continuous improvement guidebook,

developed by the Office of Student Learning, the school staff then studies the implemented strategies to determine areas of strength and areas to improve for the following year.

The capstone of Success Partners is an interactive Learning Compact, designed by Step Up's IT department, which is currently being beta tested by 27 schools. This compact will give teachers, families and students a way to productively utilize the Common Core State Standards, where each party agrees to support one another for the success of the student. These standards are a national initiative of uniform academic benchmarks adopted in 45 states, three territories, and the District of Columbia for grades kindergarten through 12 to ensure that students are ready for careers and college.

"I feel very excited and prepared to begin working on Success Partners with my staff," said Kellie Potter, principal of St. Joseph Catholic School in Bradenton. "The materials are well-organized and we have been provided with everything we need. I think this will be a valuable and timely project, as we continue to work to retain and recruit students."

For additional information please contact the Office of Student Learning at (813) 402-0180.



### CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

needed an environment that could provide a more creative outlet for her free-spirited nature.

"I knew that Taylor needed more than just academics when her third-grade teacher called and told me she was dancing in the classroom," Shannon recalled with a laugh.

The next year, Taylor began attending Classical Christian School of the Arts in Pinellas Park, where she could take dance classes. However, that year, Taylor began to experience severe headaches and seizures that interfered with her daily life.

"Her headaches would be so bad sometimes that she would ball up in a corner, holding her head and rocking back and forth," Shannon said.

After running tests, her doctors found that Taylor had an Arnold-Chiari malformation, a structural defect in the part of the brain that controls balance, causing pressure, resulting in many of the symptoms Taylor experienced. She underwent successful brain surgery at age 10. But with surgery, a long recovery and follow-up doctor's appointments, she missed a lot of school and fell behind in her classwork.

Shannon decided that for Taylor's self-esteem, a change of scenery would be best, and enrolled Taylor for the fifth grade at Academy Prep Center of St. Petersburg, a prestigious mid-

dle school known for its rigorous academic curriculum, but it proved to be too much for Taylor. Once again, she fell behind in school and slumped into depression, her mother said.

"After that year, Taylor really felt stupid and thought something was wrong with her," said Shannon. "She didn't understand why she had to keep going back to the doctor for check-ups and hated feeling so behind. Even her dance teachers noticed that she was just going through the motions. I didn't know what to do."

Shannon's answer came when she heard about St. Petersburg Christian School and visited the campus.

"I fell in love with the school, and of course they fell in love with Taylor," Shannon explained. "We decided that Taylor should repeat the fifth grade, and it was the best decision ever."

The nurturing environment at St. Petersburg Christian helped to raise Taylor's self-esteem, and her grades followed.

"Taylor is so full of life now, and being at SPCS has really helped her with that," Shannon said. "The school environment plays a big part and now I can see that she has confidence in herself. I am thankful that they've been there for her, constantly encouraging her, and I'm so grateful to [Step Up] for the help."

Both Shannon and Taylor credit the people at the school for her turnaround, and say that they make their family feel welcome.

"My grades have gotten so much better at SPCS," Taylor said. "The teachers break the work down so that I can get it, and they really pushed me hard. They knew I could do it, and I really wanted to show improvement."

Taylor has certainly shown improvement in the classroom. She now earns A's and B's in her classes and considers math her favorite subject. The self-proclaimed procrastinator now gets upset when she makes a C on an assignment.

"My attitude has changed, too. I knew I needed to get my act together, so I could get into the high schools I like," Taylor said.

Just a few months away from beginning her first year of high school, Taylor's hard work has paid off in the form of a considerable scholarship to one of the nation's top perform-

ing arts high schools. A local business man donated the remaining \$10,000 to fill the tuition gap.

"Thanks to St. Petersburg Christian, Taylor is literally ready to take on the world – it's amazing," Shannon said. "She has overcome a lot of adversity in her life, but I know now she'll be ready for high school. She tells me that she doesn't need help with homework and says, 'I got it, mom.' She lets me know she's ready to take care of herself."

The bittersweet reality of having to send Taylor across the country to boarding school hasn't quite set in for Shannon, but she smiles when she hears Taylor say that now her mother will have more time for herself.

"Taylor has been my inspiration since the day she was born. She inspired me to go back to school to get my degree and make a career for myself," Shannon said. "I am so proud, as a mother, to see how focused she is. She knows exactly what she needs to do to become who she wants to be. I know she will make it."

## About St. Petersburg Christian School

St. Petersburg Christian School (SPCS) was founded in 1971 with a vision to reach out to the surrounding community and provide an excellent education in a nurturing environment. Today, it serves more than 450 students in kindergarten through eighth grade, 131 of whom receive funding from Step Up For Students.

SPCS uses the Stanford Achievement Test to measure students' academic success. Upon completion of eighth grade, most of the students attend magnet and honors programs in high school.



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 scholarship programs and related support to give economically disadvantaged families the freedom to choose the best learning options for their children.

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