Legislators pass bill to expand school choice to more Florida families

Florida’s scholarship for low-income students is getting a makeover this fall and the next few years, with larger scholarships, easier access and higher income eligibility.

“The Florida Legislature listened to parents,” said Step Up For Students President Doug Tuthill, “resulting in more help closing the gap between the scholarship and tuition. Legislators also recognized that families whose income is just above the cutoff can’t afford a private school without a little help. This is all good news for low-income and working-class parents who are fighting to provide their children with a better life.”

The bill passed on May 2, the final day of the 2014 legislative session, and is expected to be signed into law and put into effect during the month of June. With it, changes will roll out over a period of three years. The most immediate change, though, is an increase this fall in the scholarship amount, from $4,880 to $5,272, that is tied to a multiplier in existing law. The $5,272 scholarship for 2014-15 represents a 34 percent increase from five years ago.

The new legislation will also bring:

- **No more worries about last year’s school for new students.** Right now, new students who are entering the scholarship in middle or high school must not only meet the income guidelines but also must have attended a Florida public school the previous year. That prior-year attendance requirement will be removed for every grade and every eligible income level.

- **Partial scholarships for students at higher incomes.** Beginning in 2016-17, partial scholarships will be available to students with family incomes as high as $60,010 (for a household of four). Currently, the income for new students cannot exceed $44,122. For those with incomes between those two amounts, the scholarship will be gradually reduced from a full scholarship at the lower amount to a half scholarship at the upper limit. Priority will be given to students at the lower income level.

- **An even higher scholarship in 2016-17.** The scholarship this fall, $5,272, represents 76 percent of the per-student public school operational amount. That amount is set to increase to 80 percent in 2015-16 and, under the new legislation, to 82 percent in 2016-17.

- **An open door for children in foster care.** Children in foster care already automatically qualify for the scholarships. Under the change, they will be able to apply for scholarships year-round, keep their scholarship even if they are adopted and also qualify if they are in “out-of-home” care.

Step Up For Students served roughly 60,000 students in 1,425 private schools in the 2013-14 school year, and anticipates being able to serve about 67,000 students in 2014-15. That’s because the statewide cap on tax-credited contributions increases from $286 million to $358 million.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4
RNDC redirects $15 million to Step Up For Students Scholarship Program

Rep. Jamie Grant, of Tampa, visited Republic National Distributing Company’s Tampa office on May 20 to personally thank company representatives for providing $15 million worth of scholarships for low-income Florida students.

“The significance and lasting impact of this contribution cannot be overstated,” Grant said. “By supporting the Step Up For Students Scholarship Program, Republic National is investing in the future of our children and our community by providing educational opportunities for Florida’s lower-income K-12 students.”

Representatives from Step Up For Students joined Grant in thanking Republic National Distributing Company (RNDC) executives for the contribution, which will fund more than 2,750 scholarships.

Step Up For Students is funded by corporate donors, like Republic National Distributing Company, that receive a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for their contributions to the program.

Ron Barcena, executive vice president of RNDC Florida, presented Step Up For Students President Doug Tuthill with an oversized check representing the company’s $15 million pledge for the 2014-15 school year.

“Republic National Distributing Company is thrilled to support a program that so positively affects the lives of Florida children,” said Barcena. “We know that a quality education is the cornerstone for a successful future, and we couldn’t be more pleased to help provide a great foundation for so many students in need.”

Republic National Distributing Company, the nation’s second largest distributor of premium wine and spirits, joined Step Up For Students as a corporate partner in 2012 and has since contributed a total of $45 million.

“On behalf of our families, we thank Republic National Distributing Company for their generosity. There are thousands of students who will now have a choice in their education, thanks to this significant contribution,” said Doug Tuthill, Step Up For Students president. “RNDC is a wonderful partner and we are thankful for their continued support.”

DONOR UPDATE

Corporate support for Step Up For Students is setting a new record in 2014 with $231 million pledged through May 13. We are grateful to the corporations that have extended or renewed their generous support, as well as those considering partnership. It is through these contributions that we are able to fulfill our mission of providing scholarships to low-income children in Florida.

With grateful appreciation, we recognize the following corporations for their commitments to Step Up For Students.

-Debbie Woerner, Executive Vice President of Development, Step Up For Students
Sister Nivia Arias perches behind the podium inside St. Joseph Catholic School’s cafeteria, her laptop open and a microphone at the ready. It’s time for Holy Karaoke, a motivational program led by the Salesian nun that entices students to dance and sing, and prepare for the day ahead.

But on this morning, it’s another nun doing the crooning. Splashed across the school’s movie screen is Sister Cristina Scuccia, a YouTube sensation since her recent appearance on the Italian version of the popular TV show “The Voice.”

The 25-year-old contestant surprised the show’s judges, and much of the world, when she belted out an Alicia Keys’ ballad in full habit. But Catholic leaders everywhere, including Arias, saw the performance as a way to connect with young people.

“Never underestimate the good example you give to others,” Arias tells the nearly 200 rapt boys and girls seated before her.

For them, Holy Karaoke is fun time before the hard work begins. But to Arias and other St. Joseph leaders, it’s an opportunity to help keep the 118-year-old Tampa school relevant in today’s world.

Like other Catholic schools across the country, St. Joseph in Tampa has struggled with dwindling resources and declining attendance. In the past two decades, more than 1,300 Catholic schools have closed. But the trend appears to be turning, at least in Florida, where K-12 enrollment is on the rise.

Catholic Diocese leaders give some of the credit for the increase to the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, which helps low-income parents choose the best school for their child’s needs. Sometimes, that’s a private school.

Statewide, the 235 Catholic schools saw a slight bump in enrollment for the second year in a row, from 75,969 in 2012-13 to 76,500 students this year.

At St. Joseph, the number of students has nearly doubled in the decade since the school partnered with Step Up For Students, with 265 students this year in prekindergarten through eighth grade. Of the K-8 students whose families qualify, 128 receive the needs-based scholarship.

One of those is kindergartner Mariana Santiago-Escobar. After coming to St. Joseph for prekindergarten, her vocabulary “blew up,” said Mariana’s mother, Ana Escobar. Having academic lessons accompanied by catechism made the school choice even more desirable.

Escobar also likes the small classes – about 25 students per teacher. And there’s plenty of accountability. Every student in grades three through eight takes a standardized test – the national Iowa Assessment – and STARR reading assessments to measure learning gains.

But with annual tuition set at $6,000 for the 2013-14 school year, the opportunity to attend St. Joseph wouldn’t have been possible without Step Up For Students, Escobar said.

Another source of support for Catholic schools comes from the University of Notre Dame and its Alliance for Catholic Education – or ACE – a program celebrating its 20th anniversary this year. Among several initiatives, ACE runs a graduate-level program that directly benefits Catholic schools with teacher and leadership training.

Through the Diocese of St. Petersburg, St. Joseph and its sister school, Sacred Heart in Pinellas Park, partnered with Notre Dame to form ACE Academies nearly two years ago. Since then, both schools have enjoyed a healthy spike in enrollment.

“We’ve almost at capacity here,” said Julisse Levy, the advancement specialist for the two ACE Academies. “There’s a lot of buzz about St. Joseph Catholic School … a lot of families calling up to see if they can get in.”

In addition, school administrators have taken part in extensive professional development, and ACE also provides an on-site teaching and learning instructor for the teachers.

“They’ve been a gift to us,” said St. Joseph Principal Brenda Budd.

But she also realizes that by participating in the ACE program, her school is giving something back.

“It’s exciting,” Budd said, “to be the basis of what could potentially save Catholic schools across the nation.”

Jorge Perez, a former Step Up For Students scholar, made the most of his time at Academy Prep, earning scholarships to the prestigious boarding school high school Phillips Exeter Academy and, later, to Columbia University.

Jorge Perez remembers the first time he walked through the black iron gates of Academy Prep of Tampa, a private middle school in the heart of a blighted Central Florida neighborhood.

Like the Cuban coffee wafting from the bakery next door, the smell of opportunity permeated the air.

“It was very different from the other middle schools I had seen and the atmosphere was buzzing,” recalled Jorge, a rising sixth-grader at the time. “It felt like a place where I could grow.”

The Step Up For Students scholar left the Academy three years later as the eighth-grade class valedictorian. He also earned an academic scholarship to Phillips Exeter, the elite New Hampshire boarding school known for its Ivy League connections and its distinguished former students, including Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg.

Exeter – and Jorge – didn’t disappoint. He graduated in 2012 with yet another scholarship and became the first Academy Prep alum to attend Columbia University in New York City. Today, the 19-year-old sophomore is studying philosophy and economics with an eye toward law school, while his little brother, Julian, another Step Up scholar at Academy Prep, follows in his footsteps at Phillips Exeter in the fall.

It’s an amazing journey that began with the power of choice. Thanks to Step Up, Jorge’s family wasn’t limited to their ZIP code or their budget when they went looking for the right middle school. Instead, they got to choose a school based on how it served their needs – and stoked their dreams.

“I used to wonder, ‘How will my kids go to college?’” said Jorge’s mother, Sophia Flores, a single mother who sometimes worked three jobs to make ends meet. “I don’t know how to express truly, every day, the blessings of the Academy. They are changing these kids’ lives forever.”

When Jorge didn’t seem challenged at his public magnet school, Flores began searching for options. She heard about the impressive college preparatory program at Academy Prep, but the real estate broker never dreamed she could afford private school tuition.

Then she learned she qualified for financial help through Step Up For Students. Soon after, Jorge applied to Academy Prep, where he
PARENTS AND FAMILIES:
If you haven't completed your 2014-15 scholarship application, don’t delay. Time is running out. Applications are first-come, first-served and funding is limited. Go to www.StepUpForStudents.org to apply or complete your application.

PARENTS:
Don’t forget to visit the “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.”

WHAT FAMILIES NEED TO KNOW, FROM PAGE 1

denied, to see if any will now be eligible under the new guidelines,” said Anne White, Step Up For Students vice president of operations. “We will notify families of any changes via email. We hope to have these reviews wrapped up by early summer.”

New applications are still being accepted for both new and renewal families for the 2014-15 school year, but the end of the process is nearing. And anyone who has submitted an incomplete application needs to send in all of the required documents immediately: By mid-May, Step Up had already awarded more than 61,800 scholarships.

“Families need to think of this as their last call because we’d hate to have a student who wants a scholarship and is eligible to miss out,” said White. “But they are first-come, first-served because funding is limited.”

Anyone who has questions about applications can email info@stepupforstudents.org, or call the contact center at 877-735-7837.

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT, FROM PAGE 3

had to pass a skills test and turn in essays – including one written by his mom about how she expected her son to succeed.

Once enrolled, Jorge, like all Academy Prep students, had to maintain good grades or face expulsion. Flores had to agree to volunteer at the school. Both had to commit to 11-hour school days, 11 months a year, including some Saturdays. Sometimes, Jorge would go to school before sunrise and come home when it was dark again.

It wasn’t easy in the beginning and, soon, Jorge had a change of heart.

"I do remember wanting to switch schools midway through the year," he said. "At times, the work was overwhelming and very tough."

But he stuck it out and the effort paid off with an offer from Exeter. Academy Prep gifted the family with plane tickets so they could see the school before making any big decisions.

Exeter administrators rolled out the red carpet.

“They treated us like millionaires,” Flores recalled. When the family left, she asked her son, “What do you want to do?”

He knew it the moment he stepped on Exeter’s 223-year-old campus.

“Mom, this is where I want to be,” Jorge told her. For the next four years, “half my heart was gone,” Flores said.

Jorge struggled, too.

“Leaving home was very difficult,” he said. “But at the same time it was very liberating and exciting. I felt that I had achieved something and this only motivated me to continue to work. … It just always felt right.”

Academy Prep of Tampa and its sister school in St. Petersburg are modeled after the recently disbanded Nativity Miguel Network of Schools, a group of nonprofit schools that catered to economically disadvantaged children. At the Tampa campus, about 112 students in grades 5-8 attend classes for 11 hours a day, 11 months a year and sometimes on Saturdays. Student achievement is measured by the national Stanford 10 assessment test. Every student receives the Step Up For Students Scholarship, which helps pay a portion of the $16,000-plus annual tuition. The remainder comes from private donors and foundations dedicated to dramatically changing children’s lives through education. Most Academy graduates (82 percent) go on to top private high schools, such as Exeter or, closer to home, Tampa Prep. The other 20 percent enroll in a local college-preparatory charter school. Almost every student (94 percent) graduates high school with 82 percent attending college.

About Academy Prep of Tampa

Step Up For Students congratulates the Class of 2014!

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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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