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Judge dismisses lawsuit challenging Florida tax credit scholarships



The overwhelming support Step Up has had from scholarship families has played a vital role in the case. Several Step Up families who served as intervenors attended a court hearing in Tallahassee on Dec. 5.

Claims the lawsuit would harm public schools were purely “speculative,” Reynolds wrote, siding with arguments made by lawyers for the state and parents who intervened in the case. The plaintiffs could not show the program would hurt school districts’ per-pupil funding, or result in “any adverse impact on the quality of education” in public schools.

In a statement, Bishop Victor Curry, a Miami pastor and a leader of the campaign against the lawsuit, welcomed the ruling.

“By dismissing the legal challenge to the scholarship program, Judge Reynolds affirmed that it is a valuable tool that can continue to change thousands of children’s lives for the better, and our communities and our state along with them,” he said.

Step Up currently has about 70,000 low-income students on scholarship for the 2014-15 school year.

Joanne McCall, a vice president of the Florida Education Association and the lead plaintiff in the case, has previously intimated she would appeal the issue all the way to the state Supreme Court, if necessary.

In a statement quoted by the Tampa Bay Times’ Gradebook blog, McCall said she was disappointed in the ruling, and again likened the 14-year-old scholarship program to a separate voucher program the union

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Plan to expand special needs scholarship program fails

The approved bill got tied up into the state budget dispute

A plan to expand the Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts (PLSA) for students with certain special needs fell victim to a legislative dispute over the state budget in the annual session that ended May 1. Florida lawmakers must meet again to adopt a budget by July 1, but it is not clear whether PLSA changes will be taken up in the special session.

The House and Senate each unanimously passed PLSA bills, but the session ended prior to resolution of the two bills. “The Legislature gave this program a big bipartisan thumbs up,” said Step Up For Students President Doug Tuthill. “We hope lawmakers will be able to finish the good work they started when they reconvene for a special session.”

The proposals expanded eligibility to students across the autism spectrum, added those with muscular dystrophy, and opened it up to 3- and 4-year-olds. They also included new approved expenses, such as part-time tutoring, and gave renewing student priority for scholarships each year. Budget writers considered increasing the \$18.4 million allocation this year to as much as \$50 million in 2015-16.

There were no changes to the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship for low-income students this year. The final scholarship amount will be determined once the Legislature approves the state budget in June. Step Up leaders project the scholarship will increase from \$5,272 this year to about \$5,690 in 2015-16.

This year, Step Up served nearly 70,000 K-12 students in 1,525 private schools on the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship and approved nearly 1,600 students for the PLSA.

UnitedHealthcare celebrates \$10 million donation to Step Up For Students Scholarship Program, sponsors student fitness event at Tampa Adventist Academy

Students at Tampa Adventist Academy had an extra reason to jump, run and play in the school gymnasium on April 16 during a special event sponsored by Step Up For Students and UnitedHealthcare.

Students in kindergarten through 10th grade completed a P.E. warm-up routine before taking part in a wellness and education presentation. The event is designed to help children learn the importance of physical fitness as an integral component of overall wellness.

Step Up For Students helps administer the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, which provides K-12 scholarships to qualified families throughout Florida. The program allows recipients to choose between scholarships to help with private school tuition and fees or with transportation to an out-of-district public school. There are nearly 70,000 students on scholarship this school year. The scholarships are funded by corporations that receive a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for their contributions.

David Lewis, CEO of UnitedHealthcare North and Central Florida, shared with students the benefits of an active lifestyle and why being physically fit is critical to their longtime health. He also presented a \$10 million check to Step Up For Students.

“UnitedHealthcare is grateful for the opportunity to invest in our children by supporting Step Up For Students and helping to shape



Sophomore Deborah Bajard spoke about her experience using the Step Up scholarship to attend Tampa Adventist Academy.

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DONOR UPDATE

Corporate support for Step Up For Students has set a new record in 2015 with \$295 million pledged through May 8. 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*

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Companies: Claim your tax credit

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. If your company has not yet notified us of your pledge, please do so by emailing Debbie.Woerner@suofs.org.

Donor Corner



As one of Florida's largest distributors of wines, spirits and other beverages, it is Premier Beverage's vision to be the distributor of choice in the industry, and its leaders take every step to ensure that it be the company's stature. Keeping Premier's vision and mission in line has come with a sense of corporate responsibility which has sparked community awareness campaigns for responsible drinking, a commitment to sustainability with a state-of-the-art LEED-certified distribution facility in Tampa, and an emphasis on giving back to the community.

The company, which also has facilities in Pensacola, Jacksonville, Orlando and Miramar, prides itself as being a positive, active and influential member of the community. This ultimately led to a partnership with Step Up For Students beginning in 2011, donating more than \$14.4 million to the cause. From this commitment, Step Up, which helps administer the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program for low-income students in Florida, was able to award 3,495 scholarships to students from Premier's contribution alone. Since then, Premier has redirected more than \$89.4 million to Step Up, and recently pledged to increase its 2015 contribution to \$65 million, which is expected to fund about 11,000 scholarships for economically disadvantaged children in Florida.

"We are extremely grateful for the tremendous partnership with Premier, their ongoing support of the parental choice movement, and providing low-income children with an opportunity to find the best school that meets their individual needs," said Step Up For Students President Doug Tuthill. "Their commitment has already provided scholarships for nearly 19,000 students, and it's a game-changer for these students' lives. This year's contribution helps even more."

Back when Premier President and CEO Bob Drinon and Chief Financial Officer Eric Roth started looking into Step Up, they made sure they heavily vetted the company.

"We were very impressed at the time when we did the initial research. It was a very highly rated charity, and because Premier Beverage operates exclusively in Florida, and our money would be staying home, we really liked that," said Roth.

The pair were also confident that the program didn't take away from public education, it merely enhanced it by giving those in need options they otherwise wouldn't have to find a school that was the right fit for their children. It was a commitment that company leaders could make and really feel good about as they saw the return on investment by meeting some of the families who participated in Step Up's income-based scholarship program, Roth said.

"It always hits home," he said. "I am a father of two kids who have opportunities, so to give others the help, it's just wonderful. It warms my heart. ... If we can keep these kids in school and change the paths of their lives, there's nothing better than that."

Jenna Ingraham, Premier's director of public relations, said it's a program that the company is especially proud to be a part of, and they even promote it to their own employees because they know some of their children could benefit from the scholarships.

"There is no greater investment that we can make than investing today in the students who are our future workforce," Ingraham said. "It's a no-brainer really."

They feel so strongly about the benefits of the Step Up scholarship program that both Roth and Ingraham encourage any company that has a tax liability to Florida and is able to redirect, to take a look at the program and strongly consider donating.

In fact, it's something Premier leaders say is vital to continue supporting for their company, for the less fortunate families, and for the benefit to the state as a whole.

"It's a long-term partnership," Roth said. "We're here for the long haul."

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT: Sophie Navarro, Belleview

A year ago, Sophie Navarro got a diagnosis that's hard for even adults to pronounce: focal segmental glomerulosclerosis, or FSGS for short. It's even harder to live with, especially for a 13-year-old girl.

FSGS is scar tissue that develops on the parts of the kidneys that filter waste from the blood. In most cases, it leads to eventual kidney failure. For Sophie, doctors estimate she'll be in complete renal failure within five years, her mother, Robin Navarro, said. And Sophie is not expected to be a candidate for a kidney transplant due to her disease's progression.

While all of this is hard to bear for Sophie and her family, the one thing they are more grateful for than ever is the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship. Through the program, which Step Up For Students helps administer, Sophie is able to attend Souls Harbor Academy, a private school in Belleview, near Ocala.

"She gets overwhelmed; she's a normal kid," said Robin describing Sophie's experience since she was diagnosed. "But, the teachers, youth leaders, administrators, they're with her. They're supporting her."

Principal Donald Currie said that with Sophie's medical issues, he, too, sees how Souls Harbor benefits her.

"The scholarship has given her the opportunity to be able to afford an environment that is understanding of her health condition, her family life and caters to her academic and spiritual needs as well," he said.

Sophie's medical plight began one night in February 2014 when she was unwell and her father, Larry, took her to the hospital, where they soon learned her blood pressure had spiked to an "adult range stroke" level. Medical staff observed her closely for a few hours and released her when her blood pressure returned to normal.

"I thought that it was just a fluke or something," said Robin.

By Monday, Sophie was back in her eighth-grade class. But after school, she wasn't feeling well again. Her mother took her to a different emergency facility, and Sophie's blood pressure was high once again. That's when a battery of tests began and lasted until May when doctors finally had a diagnosis. High blood pressure and FSGS go hand in hand. She's treated mostly by blood-pressure medication and a special low-protein, low-citrus diet.

"She does not look sick if you saw her. I

know God has his hands on her," said Robin.

By the time Sophie was born, Robin, who has three grown older children, had already experienced heartbreaking loss. Her first husband passed away after a year of battling a terminal illness, and then her first daughter with her current husband, Larry, died at 8 months old from pneumococcal meningitis. When Sophie was born the next year, Robin and Larry kept a watchful eye on her, sending her to a Christian preschool. When their family's financial dynamic changed, they applied to Step Up to keep Sophie at Souls Harbor.

"That was a huge load off," Robin said. And Souls Harbor has been a great fit for Sophie.

"I saw her growing, I saw her get growing in the spirit, even in that young age because they had chapel, and I saw her levelly working on academics," Robin said. I saw her in a smaller classroom setting, getting more one-on-one attention, where when she was having trouble with something, she could easily get help."

This has all become so important, Robin and Larry said, since Sophie became ill and has regular trips to UF Health Shands Hospital in Gainesville. Now a freshman, Sophie can still play sports she enjoys like volleyball and basketball. But she can't play for more than a few minutes at a time because it is just too much on her body.

Still, Sophie, 14, thinks about the future. She hopes to go to college and may consider a medical career.

"I think it's because all that I've gone through and all that," she said of her new idea. "I just know there are so many more problems, health issues and just thinking about helping other people and I could study how I could be there for another person. Just pay it forward, I guess."



Souls Harbor Christian Academy

Located in Belleview, Souls Harbor Christian Academy was founded in 1979 by Souls Harbor First Pentecostal Church with a vision to open a school with solid academics that followed the same spiritual beliefs. In 1987, the school moved into a new facility on the church grounds, and transitioned from a self-paced learning center to a more traditional classroom. Today, the school has 76 students enrolled in pre-kindergarten through 12th grade, including 34 Step Up scholars. Tuition for the 2014-15 school year is \$4,750. The school uses the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and is accredited by National Association of Christian Education.

SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT: La Progresiva Presbyterian School

When Melissa Rego tells boys and girls at La Progresiva Presbyterian School to study hard, the principal thinks back to her mother's advice.

"She told me, 'You need to become someone,'" said Rego, a first-generation Cuban-American from the same hardscrabble Little Havana neighborhood in Miami where many of her students live.

That guidance helped motivate Rego to graduate near the top of her high school class and earn a community college scholarship that led to a master's degree from Nova Southeastern University. Now it serves as the foundation of her education philosophy at La Progresiva.

"Our focus is on the students," she said, "because they are limitless."

La Progresiva was founded originally more than a century ago in Cardenas, Cuba, where missionaries longed for all children to receive quality education. Known then as El Colegio La Progresiva, it was one of the country's most prestigious schools until the

communist regime seized control of Cuba in 1959.

La Progresiva closed three years later, but alumni in Miami reopened the school in 1971 with the same purpose in mind: to help every child succeed. It's an ideology that continues today with the help of education advocates and programs like Step Up For Students and the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship.

Of the private school's 543 students, 431 receive the income-based scholarship that assists families with tuition and other fees. About 97 percent of the student population qualifies for free or reduced-price school lunches.

Parents, many who don't speak English, choose the school for its academic rigor and religious instruction, Rego said, including an emphasis on math and reading comprehension, and daily prayer. Teachers design lessons from the Bible and the Bob Jones University Press, with electives in art, drama, health, journalism, physical education and Spanish.

The school is accredited by the Florida League of Christian Schools and AdvancED.

There also are clubs, such as yearbook, and sports, including the Knights basketball team, all offered to create new opportunities – and new

perspectives on education and life – for students.

So far, it all seems to work, Rego said. School-wide, test scores continue to rise and about 75 percent of graduates attend college. Many, like Valentin Mendez, have become serious students.

"I'm really focused now," said the 10th-grader. "I don't do the childish things I once did."

Like pretend he was sick so his mother wouldn't send him to his neighborhood elementary school, where he said teachers didn't notice him and kids bullied him due to his poor English.

"I was lost," Valentin recalled. "Physically and emotionally."

When he came to La Progresiva, his principal recognized her new student needed more than a new school. Rego convinced Valentin's mom, Jeannette Ruiz, to have him repeat fifth grade.

Valentin flourished academically amid the personalized instruction and safe environment offered at La Progresiva. At the end of sixth grade, he scored so well on his annual Stanford 10 national assessment that Rego asked him to skip a grade and rejoin his eighth-grade peers.

"Academically, he's a good student," she said. "He pretty much gets straight A's."



Valentin Mendez



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UNITEDHEALTHCARE EVENT, FROM PAGE 1

healthier communities,” said Lewis.

Since 2009, UnitedHealthcare has contributed \$49 million to Step Up For Students, funding more than 10,600 scholarships.

Deborah Bajard, a 10th-grader and one of 75 Step Up scholars at the school, spoke about transferring to the school last year and quickly felt at home.

“When I first started, I liked that the school was small and I didn’t feel like I was going to get lost,” she told the crowd. “Last year was really great. Since then, I have made some close friends and am proud to say I’m a straight-A student.

After the presentation, Tampa Adventist Academy students got moving in a series of activities such as group jump rope, relay races and plyometric drills.

“UnitedHealthcare is a tremendous partner in our mission to help Florida families customize their children’s education and we know that without their help, thousands of Florida students wouldn’t have had this chance,” said Doug Tuthill, Step Up For Students president. “We and our families are grateful for their commitment to the community.”

UnitedHealthcare of Florida serves more than 3.1 million Florida residents through a health-care network of more than 250 hospitals and 37,000 physicians statewide.

JUDGE DISMISSES LAWSUIT, FROM PAGE 1

successfully challenged in 2006.

Olivia Schaeffer, who has three children using Step Up scholarships and had intervened in the lawsuit to support the program, said the ruling bodes well for the educational plans she and her husband have set for their children.

“The scholarships have allowed us to put them in the schools that we know work best for them, and where we know they are getting the education they need to succeed in life,” she said. “We know there is still a long road ahead, but after today we feel stronger and more hopeful.”

Today’s ruling in many ways echoes an earlier lawsuit challenging Florida’s newest school choice legislation. In that case, a judge also ruled the groups challenging the program could not show it harmed public schools.

The U.S. Supreme Court and state supreme courts in New Hampshire and elsewhere have rejected lawsuits challenging tax credit scholarships on similar grounds.

This story was reprinted from the redefinED blog, which Step Up For Students co-hosts. The author is Travis Pillow. Read the blog at www.redefinedonline.org.

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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SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT, FROM PAGE 3

Valentin gives a lot of credit to his teachers.

“They push us to do better things,” he said. “They want to help us.”

Today, Valentin doesn’t worry about falling through the cracks or getting into fights. He looks forward to becoming a businessman – “maybe international,” he said wistfully. “I want to travel the world.”

He gained national attention recently when he appeared during the 2015 Super Bowl in a commercial sponsored by the Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options (HCREO) denouncing a lawsuit filed against the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program, which was recently dismissed. Valentin and his mom also were featured in a video produced by the James Madison Institute of Tallahassee promoting school choice and the tax credit scholarship.

His growing celebrity has served to motivate him even more to succeed. And that’s reason enough, Rego said, to stay the course at her school.

“We try to teach these kids that you need to become someone,” she said. “We don’t have time to waste. Not here in Little Havana.”