Judge dismisses lawsuit challenging Florida tax credit scholarships

A lawsuit challenging the country’s largest private school choice program saw a significant setback on May 18, as a Leon County circuit judge ruled the groups behind the case did not have standing to bring the lawsuit.

The statewide teachers union, the Florida PTA, the Florida School Boards Association and other groups filed the lawsuit in August, arguing the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program, which Step Up For Students helps administer, unconstitutionally created a “parallel” system of publicly supported schools and violated a state constitutional provision barring state aid for religious institutions.

Judge George Reynolds, however, dismissed the case May 18. The plaintiffs, he ruled, could not show the scholarships harm public schools, and could not challenge the program as taxpayers because it is not funded through the state budget.

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 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

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

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 PE 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 long-term 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

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4
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

2014-2015 Donors

Duke Energy
Gold Coast Beverage, LLC
2014 Honors
Cargill Incorporated
ITG Holdings U.S.A., Inc.
KNMTE Inc.
PharmaWorks Inc.
Syco Jacksonville, Inc.
Syco West Coast Florida, Inc.
2015 Partners
ABC Fine Wine and Spirits, Inc.
Ace American Insurance Company and Affiliates
Ark Royal Insurance Company
Ascendant Commercial Insurance, Inc.
Auto Club Insurance Company of Florida
BAC Florida Bank
Bookbinder Sales & Service
Carroll Distributing Company
Centennial Bank
CenterState Bank of Florida, NA
Cener Corporation
Champion Brands, Inc.
City Beverages Orlando
Cypress Property & Casualty Insurance Company
Daytona Beverages, LLC
Delta National Bank and Trust Company
Dicks Spooling Goods
Dixie Strawberries Associates, Inc.
Energy Insurance Mutual Limited
Euler Hermes North America Insurance Company
EverBank

FCCI
Florida Community Bank NA
Florida Distributing Company
Florida Life Insurance Company
Florida Family Insurance Company
Florida Public Utilities Company
Fosuul Group, Inc.
Gap, Inc.
GEICO Companies
Goldring Gulf Distributing
Gulf Power
Gulfstream Property and Casualty Insurance Company
HCA
HealthCare Service Corporation, a Mutual Legal Reserve Company
Humana Inc.
IBM/IBERBANK
J.L. Taylor Distributing Florida, Inc.
Johnson & Johnson Vision Care, Inc.
Kemper Home Service Companies
Lincoln Benefit Life Company
Lincoln Heritage Life Insurance Company
Mercury Insurance Company of Florida
Old Republic National Title Insurance Company
Philadelphia Insurance Companies
Raymond James
Republic National Distributing Company, L.L.C.
Rosen Hotels & Resorts
Safeco United Bank
Saddle Creek Corporation
Safepoint Insurance Company
Safety National Casualty Corporation

Sagito Life Insurance Company
Seawins, Inc./Lakeridge Winery & Vineyards
and San Sebastian Winery
Security Mutual Life Insurance Company of New York
Smith & Nephew, Inc.
Southern Eagle Distributing, Inc.
St. Johns Insurance Company, Inc.
Summit Bank NA
The Container Store
The Doctors Company
The Hartford Financial Services Group, Inc.
The Main Street America Group
The Vitamin Shoppe
Tractor Supply Company
Tri Eagle Sales
UCB, Inc.
Universal Insurance Company of North America
TIPC Insurance
Urban Outfitters, Anthology, and Free People
Unitek Holdings, Inc.
Value Pawn and EZORP Company
Ware Management
Westcor Land Title Insurance Company
Westfield Insurance

Companies: Claim your tax credit

If your company has pledged to the Step Up For Students program this year and has not yet notified us, please do so now so that we can extend our gratitude to you and assist your company with making the necessary steps to receive your tax credit, including the required certificate of contribution for your tax records. If your company has not yet notified us of your pledge, please do so by emailing Debbie Woerner at dwoerner@bfs.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 Drinnon 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.”

2
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 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 Bellevue, 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 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 getting 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,” said her 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.”

---

**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 AdvanceED.

There also are clubs, such as a 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. Schoolwide, test scores continue to rise and about 75 percent of graduates attend college. Many, like Valentín 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.

“Lost,” Valentín recalled. “Physically and emotionally.”

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

Valentín 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 As.”

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4
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 Tutill, 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.

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."