



STEP UP FOR STUDENTS



2014-15 Parent Handbook

A guide to the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship

Compiled by **Step Up for Students**



Welcome to Step Up For Students

Thank you for your interest in this unique education option, and you should thank the people you elect to make laws and the companies that are stepping up for your students. The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship was created in 2001 with the sole objective of providing children from low-income families a learning option they would otherwise not be able to afford, and last year it served 60,000 students in roughly 1,500 private schools throughout the state. This program depends on the contributions of companies, which are then awarded state tax credits. Since the program's inception, donor companies have committed more than \$1.7 billion towards these scholarships. The point of this scholarship is that different children learn in different ways, and we want to help assure that students from less affluent households have as many tools as possible to succeed in school.

The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program is actually run by private nonprofit groups called Scholarship Funding Organizations (SFOs), which are approved and monitored closely by the state Department of Education (DOE). Step Up For Students is a Scholarship Funding Organization serving all Florida counties, with offices in Jacksonville and Tampa.



The application process

Step Up scholarships are available to students whose household income meets the federal standard for Free and Reduced Lunch, which is established each year at 185 percent of the household poverty level. The income guideline is slightly higher, at 200-230 percent of the poverty level, for families who are renewing scholarships. The higher guideline can result in a pro-rated scholarship of 75% or 50% of the total possible \$5,272. The simplest way to apply for a scholarship is to visit our website, <http://www.stepupforstudents.org>.

Each family is required to verify household income for each year the student remains on the program. In reviewing your application, Step Up For Students will consider all the people who live in your household and all the income that is derived from the people who live in the household. Income sources include: monthly gross income from pay checks, Social Security Income/Disability for every household member (including children), child support, and any other income. Completing this process is the responsibility of the parent/guardian, not the school. Once a student has been approved for the program, you will receive a scholarship award letter. The next step is to formally select a school. Scholarships are not awarded to schools. Scholarships are awarded to students. The state department of education determines which private schools are eligible to receive Tax Credit Scholarships. A list of those schools is available at the department's website, <http://www.floridaschoolchoice.org>. Once you choose a school, take your award letter to the school you've chosen. The school will then submit a School Commitment Form (SCF) to Step Up For Students. That form will allow us to begin payments.

Please make sure this step is completed. If you enroll your child before your application has been received or before we receive a School Commitment Form (SCF), you will be responsible for the tuition and may not qualify for future scholarship funding. Additionally, admittance to a private school does not mean that students are eligible for scholarship funding. Students must qualify with Step Up For Students and successfully complete the admissions process at the participating private school of your choice.

Communication from Step Up

Throughout the application process and the school year, you can expect to receive emails and automated phone calls from Step Up For Students. These are the primary ways in which we contact families to remind them of key deadlines, missing application information, required documents, changes in application status, scholarship award notifications and other key events throughout the school year. Please ensure that your contact information is up to date within your Parent Login profile at www.stepupforstudents.org and that you are checking your spam and junk folders routinely if you feel you are missing communications.



What the tuition scholarship pays for

For public school students wishing to attend a public school outside of their assigned district, our transportation scholarship of up to \$500, may be used towards transportation expenses. The transportation scholarship is not available to private school students. It is also not available to public school students wishing to attend a public school that is outside of their school zone, but still within their school district. If you are unsure if the public school you wish your child to attend is outside your assigned district, please contact the school district for official confirmation.

For the 2014-15 school year, the maximum scholarship amount for our private school scholarship, as set by the Florida legislature, is \$5,272. The scholarship funds may be used for private school tuition and fees. For the private school scholarship, Step Up will pay the full \$5,272 or the published cost of tuition and fees at the selected private school — **whichever is less**. For students awarded a scholarship after the beginning of the school year, the actual amount of the scholarship award will be **pro-rated** based on the date of the award letter or the child's actual start date in a private school — **whichever is later**. The scholarship can only fund actual attendance in a given school year after the date of award.

Private schools that participate in the scholarship program may not charge a different rate for scholarship students. The same published tuition schedule must apply to all students, whether they are on scholarships or paying privately. Likewise, Step Up For Students can't pay for any fees that are not included on the published fee schedule provided to all prospective parents.

Many schools charge more than the \$5,272 scholarship. In some cases, schools may decide to provide Step Up scholarship students with supplemental scholarship assistance at their own discretion. But in many other cases, parents will be required to pay the difference between the scholarship and the full tuition and fees. Those payments are not discretionary. Every family must pay the difference between the school's total tuition and the amount covered by your scholarship and any financial aid or supplemental scholarships the school may provide. There are no exceptions to this rule, and a student may lose the Step Up scholarship for failure to comply.

How the scholarship payments are made

Scholarship checks are made out to each family but are sent directly to the school. The parent or guardian listed on the check **must** personally sign the check after the school receives it. There are no exceptions to this rule, and the law establishing this scholarship is clear: "A participant who fails to comply with this paragraph forfeits the scholarship." The failure of the designated parent to sign the check within five business days after being notified by the school or within the time specified by school policy could also result in the loss of your scholarship. In some extreme cases, a power of attorney will be accepted in place of the parent signature.

The checks are disbursed in four different installments: approximately September, November, February and May. A few weeks before each installment, each school is provided a report with your child's name and the scholarship amount in order to confirm ongoing attendance during that period. The school must electronically verify that the information is correct and return it to Step Up For Students. Parents, please note when signing the scholarship check that the back of the check reads "For Deposit Only" and the location of that deposit should be the school's account.

Student behavior and obligations for the scholarship

Scholarship students must follow all academic and discipline policies of the private school they attend. Schools have the right to expel or suspend students if their published policies are not followed. We recommend you carefully review those policies and procedures to ensure that your children remain eligible for the scholarship. Step Up For Students does not govern school policies regarding the retention of students due to academic or discipline failures. The third time a student is expelled from school, he or she will lose the scholarship permanently, with no option to renew. Should a student be expelled due to a violent event, the student's scholarship will be revoked immediately. (This will not affect the scholarship of any siblings.)

We have found that some students need help in making the adjustment to a new school environment. The courses may be more advanced and difficult. There may be more homework. The school may have tougher enforcement of rules and stricter discipline procedures and less tolerance for unruly or disrespectful behavior. We urge parents to remain in constant contact with the school, its counselors and teachers, and to seek tutoring or mentoring services that might be available. It is very important for parents to be fully engaged in their children's education, working together with teachers and the school



for the maximum student success.

Scholarship students are also expected to maintain regular school attendance and be in good standing with the school's existing attendance policy. If you plan to withdraw your student during the school year, please notify the school prior to withdrawal so they may notify Step Up For Students.

Moving to another eligible private school

One of the benefits of this scholarship program is that if a school is not meeting your child(ren)'s needs, you may always go to another one. You may transfer your scholarship student at any time to another eligible participating private school as long as you have no outstanding financial accounts at the previous school, including unsigned scholarship checks.

If you plan to withdraw your student during the school year, please notify your current school prior to withdrawal. The school your student is leaving must then complete an online form that confirms the student is planning to leave, and submit that form to the scholarship office within five business days of being notified that the student is leaving. The scholarship office will not transfer a scholarship until it has that confirmation and until the school confirms that the household has no outstanding balance owed.

Then, the new school you choose must fill out an SCF for your student and submit it to the scholarship office electronically. This process may include a final payment to the school that is being exited, which must be signed by the parent, or a request for refund of overpayment for the student transferring.

Renewing the scholarship or adding a brother or sister

Students who are currently on the scholarship have first priority to keep their scholarship each year, but they must also meet the renewal guidelines. Those guidelines include:

- ✓ Your student actively used the scholarship throughout this current school year.
- ✓ Your income meets the financial standards. The income for a renewal family must not exceed 230 percent of the federal poverty guideline, and that number is updated each year.
- ✓ If your child was in grades 3-10, he or she must have taken an approved standardized test. Schools must provide the test results to you as well as to the state's third-party research entity.
- ✓ You or your child has not violated the law governing this program or established policies and procedures for participation.

A checklist for scholarship families

- ✓ Parents must complete the renewal process within the deadline to be confirmed for the new school year.
- ✓ Parents must notify their public school district that your child will be participating in the program.
- ✓ Parents must give the school notice if you plan to withdraw your child during the school year.
- ✓ Parents must notify Step Up For Students if you are moving, whether it is within the area or outside the area where you currently reside.
- ✓ Parents must not fall behind on any payments owed to the school.
- ✓ The school may suspend or expel your child if you fail to pay tuition, and Step Up will not transfer a scholarship if money is still owed.

Actions that lead to a loss of the scholarship

- ✓ Misrepresenting or withholding information on the scholarship application.
- ✓ Enrolling the child in a school that is not eligible to participate.
- ✓ Expulsion from the private school.
- ✓ Failure to regular attend the private school.
- ✓ Failure of the parent to personally endorse the scholarship checks.
- ✓ Failure of the student to take a required nationally norm-referenced test in grades 3-10.
- ✓ Failure to pay any tuition or fees that exceed the \$5,272 scholarship. Outstanding balances on after school care, summer school and any other fee not covered by Step Up will not affect portability.
- ✓ Exceeding the household income limits established by the law.