

## Tax Credit Scholarship is a proven success



By DOUG TUTHILL

Businesses play a direct role in Florida's scholarship for low-income schoolchildren, and this is one program for which the return on investment is unmistakable.

To borrow from the words of Dominic Calabro, president and CEO of Florida Tax-Watch: "What makes this scholarship so valuable is that it focuses on children who historically have been at the bottom of the achievement chart, and it provides them a learning option they could never afford at a cost that results in a savings for taxpayers."

The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship was created 10 years ago to provide an extra option for low-income K-12 students, and last year it served 34,550 low-income children in 1,114 private schools. In Duval alone, 3,125 students took advantage. Nearly two-thirds of the Duval students were black, their average household income was barely 20 percent above poverty, and they were among the lowest academic performers in the public schools they left behind.

This program is no panacea, and it is not for every student. But the latest report on the academic progress is encouraging. The report, based on 2009-10 test scores, concluded the scholarship students were making modestly greater gains in reading and math than similar low-income students in district schools – even though the scholarship students were well behind their peers when they started. It is also good that the program saves tax money. The most recent evaluation by the respected state Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability pegged that number at

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\$36.2-million in 2008-09.

Businesses play a direct role because the scholarship is funded by state tax credits. This year, the state has apportioned \$175-million for dollar-for-dollar state tax credits that companies receive for making contributions to state-approved scholarship organizations. Companies can receive these credits against their corporate income, insurance premium, alcoholic beverage excise, direct pay sales or oil severance taxes. They reserve their tax credit online through the state Department of Revenue, which assures their contributions will be fully reimbursable through credits.

Here's how Casey Cesnovar, State Government Relations Manager for Walgreen Co., which has contributed \$28 million in tax-credited dollars, describes his interest: "Our company understands that, in order to have strong and prosperous communities, we must invest in the education of our youth. (This) has created a way for companies to provide valuable educational opportunities for Florida's families so that their children can thrive."

The biggest misconception we face is that this scholarship program is anti-public education. It is not. In fact, this program is essential to helping public education fulfill the promise of equal educational opportunity – a promise that is being kept to thousands of Duval children thanks to the efforts of Jacksonville's business community.

*Doug Tuthill is president of Step Up For Students, a nonprofit tax credit scholarship organization in Florida. Information is available at [www.stepupforstudents.org](http://www.stepupforstudents.org).*