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Florida scholarship program has only enriched its students



By DOUG TUTHILL
President of Step Up For Students

As Alabama introduces a scholarship program that empowers low-income parents to choose a school that best fits their children's needs, the apprehension of traditionalists in public education is understandable. But allow me to rebut a false accusation launched at your neighbor to the south: no one who administers Florida's scholarship for underprivileged children is profiting from it.

I should know. I am the president of the only remaining nonprofit organization still administering tax credit scholarships in Florida. We originally had eight nonprofits doing this work, but Florida's scholarship funding organizations get no reimbursement until they operate for three years with clean audits, and then they can only keep up to 3 cents on each tax-credited scholarship dollar they collect. Little wonder that only one has been able to raise sufficient funds to survive.

Our nonprofit, called Step Up For Students, has raised dollars privately to help keep its doors open for 12 years. So I laughed when I read that at least one

newsletter columnist and some public educators in Alabama think our nonprofit has enriched John Kirtley, the Tampa businessman who has personally funded much of our efforts. The columnist was particularly blunt: "This man Kirtley down in Florida has made \$6.3 million last year managing that fund." The scholarship, he wrote, "has resulted in a very lucrative business for him." How absurd.

Pick up any of the publicly available state-mandated annual audits of Step Up or any of its annual IRS nonprofit tax returns, and it is clear that Kirtley, our board chairman, has never received a penny in compensation. In fact, these statements show he has repeatedly opened his wallet to keep the scholarship operation alive.

John takes the money he earns in the business world and devotes it to his passion – helping low-income children. His donations to the cause of empowering low-income families have run into the millions over the last 20 years.

Similar to Florida, Alabama's new law provides for a 5 percent administrative allowance – which, incidentally, is half the amount in every other scholarship state. This is not "a profit off the top," as one critic alleged, but an amount that allows the nonprofit to do work that would otherwise fall to state government. The scope and scale of this work in Florida is instructive.

This school year, Step Up is serving 59,674 students in 1,414 schools across the state at a total cost of about \$286 million. By law, Step Up must verify the household income of every family every year, and this year we received 94,104 student applications. Our three-language contact center handled 119,455 calls, and our document center processed tens of thousands of pieces of mail. We will dis-

tribute roughly 250,000 scholarship checks, each of which must be co-endorsed by the parent and the school, which we verify. This year we will coordinate the collection of roughly 23,000 standardized test results, and will collect and analyze independent financial reports submitted by approximately 360 participating schools.

To do this work, we employ a permanent and seasonal staff of 123 people. In August, Charity Navigator, the nation's largest independent charity watchdog, gave Step Up our seventh four-star rating, its highest. In fact, Step Up received a perfect score for accountability and transparency, and we received the seventh highest overall ranking in the country.

Florida now has 12 years' worth of data on the scholarship. We know it attracts the state's poorest and lowest performing students. After joining the program, these students achieve the same gains in reading and math as students of all income levels nationally. Independent university researchers say our program also improves the academic performance of the public schools since many of their lowest performing students are coming into our program. As a lifelong educator, Democrat, and former teacher union president, I'm pleased that our program has such strong bipartisan support – for example, a majority of our legislative Black Caucus recently voted to expand our program, and the Urban League recently sponsored a series of statewide meetings to educate parents about our program.

I understand emotions run high when people debate public education policy, but bearing false witness against Mr. Kirtley and our nonprofit organization in Florida is inappropriate.