



## Protect progress in any language

*For little Havana school, scholarships in peril*

William Mattox

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Several days before the White House announced the U.S. would be normalizing relations with Cuba, a high school sophomore from Miami's Little Havana neighborhood gave a speech that wowed a bipartisan group of state legislators and education advocates at a conference sponsored by the Hispanic Council for Reform and Educational Options (HCREO). In his speech, Valentin Mendez extolled an educational program that has helped transform his life. And he introduced HCREO's conferees (including Vice President

Biden's brother, Frank) to La Progresiva, a small private school with a remarkable past . . . and an uncertain future.

La Progresiva Presbyterian School opened in Cardenas, Cuba in 1900. It served students there for three generations until Fidel Castro shut it down in 1961. After many of the school's families fled Cuba and relocated in Miami, La Progresiva re-opened in Little Havana in 1971. Today, the school serves nearly 500 students, most of whom come from low-income homes where Spanish is the primary language.

Valentin came to La Progresiva after a stint as a "6th grade drop-out." He had previously attended two Miami public schools, but had been bullied at both of them. "I was angry; I was frustrated; I cried almost every day," Valentin told HCREO. "I had no hope."

One day, Valentin's mother learned that many low-income students at La Progresiva receive Step Up Scholarships, a program Jeb Bush helped create during his time as Florida's governor. She applied for assistance; and thanks to Step Up, Valentin began classes at La Progresiva nearly five years ago (on Valentine's Day!).

Valentin initially spent many school nights sleeping on a

floor at the gas station where his mother worked the graveyard shift. "But it didn't matter to me because I was happy and was finally learning," he said. "Everything changed at my new school – I began to care; I began to dream; I began to see a future for me."

Valentin worked his way up to grade level after starting out well behind – a pattern which research has shown to be very common among Step Up students. Indeed, thanks to Step Up and other efforts to increase schooling options and accountability, low-income Hispanic fourth-graders in Florida now routinely outperform their peers in most other states. And they read as well or better than the *average student* in 20 states, according to 2013 data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Moreover, high school graduation rates among Florida Hispanics have increased 28 percentage points (from 47% to 75%) over the last 15 years.

Unfortunately, Valentin's educational journey – and that of nearly 70,000 Step Up students – may not end happily. That's because the Florida Education Association (FEA) recently filed a lawsuit that seeks to shut down Florida's tax credit scholarship program.

The teacher's union claims Step Up scholarships divert resources from the public school system. But Raoul Cantero, a former Florida Supreme Court justice, says these scholarships are actually funded by tax-favored donations from Florida businesses rather than by state monies.

Of course, even if Step Up scholarships were funded by the state, the public's interest in helping needy students like Valentin would surely deserve higher priority than worrying about whether every last student attends a government-run school. This is, after all, America – not Castro's Cuba. And shutting down educational programs that are helping needy students hardly seems "progressive" (in any language).

*William Mattox is a resident fellow at the James Madison Institute and a member of USA TODAY's Board of Contributors.*