Step Up vouchers give kids hand up

They put private schools in reach of low-income students

MARY LETT
MLET @PNJ.COM

Maverick Graves isn’t sure he would be graduating from high school in May without the benefit of his Step Up for Students scholarship.

A senior at Lighthouse Private Christian Academy in Pensacola, Maverick attended public schools until his junior year when things took a turn for the worst.

“I was doing terrible in my classes. In ninth-grade, I was OK and in 10th-grade, I was doing well in geometry but my junior year, I was put in honors Algebra II and started failing,” said the 18-year-old. “I tried after-school tutoring but I started doing bad across-the-board even in my other classes.”

Last summer, Florida’s teachers union, along with the NAACP and organizations representing school boards — including the Florida School Board Association — filed a lawsuit over private school vouchers. That $357 million program in question provides tax credits to companies that donate money to nonprofit entities that pay for children to go to private schools.

The lawsuit seeks to dismantle the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program that serves nearly 70,000 students, many of whom attend religious schools and are from low-income families.

Those arguing against the scholarships say they siphon tax revenues away from the state and the money could instead be used to increase funding for public schools.

Maverick’s experience seems to support Step Up. After high school, he plans to attend the University of West Florida. But he said he is worried that his father and stepmother — Brian and Christy Graves — can’t afford to send his siblings to Lighthouse without the vouchers.

Brian Graves said if the voucher program ends — he and his wife will move or home-school their five other children — Jonah Barnes, 17, Hunter Graves, 15, Hunter Barnes, 14, Gracie Graves, 7, and Lincoln Graves, 6. The family lives in Milton.

When Hunter Graves and Hunter Barnes started at Lighthouse in 2011-12, Graves said the family couldn’t afford the tuition — but he drove a school bus in exchange for his sons’ tuitions. The next year, he and his wife applied for the vouchers.

Brian Graves, a truck driver, said the six children each receive a $400 monthly voucher paid directly to Lighthouse. The vouchers don’t pay the entire tuition, and the children receive private scholarships to make up the difference.

Lighthouse has three campuses — two in Pensacola and one in Gulf Breeze. Tuition is $600 per month, or about $5,400 per school year.

Lighthouse’s founder, Joanne Johannes, said the schools have a total of about 300 preschoolers through 12th-graders, 43 teachers and six administrators.

“About half of those students receive vouchers,” she said, “The scholarship includes books, meals, everything except athletic activity fees.”

See Vouchers, Page 8A
Vouchers

Continued from Page 1A

For many of her parents, the Step Up for Students scholarships make a big difference in affordability. “It really gives parents a choice in their child’s education,” Johannes said. “That is really what is important.”

Single mom DeAundrae Kitchen also couldn’t afford to send her two children — Solomon Suton, 7, and Xiaomara, 11 — to Sacred Heart Cathedral School without the scholarships. The children each receive about $5,300 per school year in scholarship funds that cover their tuition.

“This is their first year to receive the full award,” said Kitchen of Pensacola. “I get paid once a month, and after taxes it’s not much, so it’s either educate them or clothe and feed them. In a situation like that, my first priority will be clothing and feeding them.”

Kitchen, who works for the Escambia County School District, said she has witnessed firsthand the shortcomings of public schools.

“At Sacred Heart, there are smaller classes — only 22 in my daughter’s sixth-grade class. Public schools are overcrowded, some classes have 27 to 30 students,” she said. “When it’s that many students, teachers can’t meet their individual needs.”

Kitchen said she’s pleased with the curricula at Sacred Heart and she feels her children are getting a better education.

“I started out at Pensacola Christian School and transitioned to public school in high school,” she said. “I think if I had remained in private school, I would be doing something more career-wise.”

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

At a glance

Step Up for Students is an initiative of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program, an educational plan designed to help low-income families in Florida obtain the best education for their children. Here are a few facts about the program:

- Corporations may annually redirect up to 100 percent of their corporate income, insurance premium, alcohol beverage excise, direct pay sales and use and/or oil and gas severance tax liabilities.
- Florida’s Department of Revenue gives participating corporations a dollar-for-dollar tax credit for every dollar transferred to fund scholarships.
- Parent household income level must fall within financial guidelines for the federal free or reduced lunch program. In the 2014-15 school year, the typical scholarship family of four had an average annual income of $24,067, or just 4.5 percent above the poverty level.
- Scholarship Funding Organizations verify each family’s income every year.
- Giving to the Tax Credit Scholarship Program does not interfere with other philanthropic giving.
- Scholarships that pay for students’ transportation to an out-of-district public school are up to $500.
- Scholarships that pay for private school tuition are limited to $5,272, or the cost of tuition, whichever is less.
- As of Jan. 1, the program’s funding cap increased to $447 million, which will allow Step Up For Students to serve additional children for the upcoming school year.

SOURCE: WWW.STEPUFORSTUDENTS.ORG