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Schools, voucher program join to help poor students

The Hillsborough school district and teachers' Union will help train private school teachers.

By TOM MARSHALL
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TAMPA — On a normal day, oil and water just don't mix.

Public schools and teachers' unions don't say nice things about those who support school vouchers, sending kids to private schools with public money. Most of the time, such folks just don't get along.

But Wednesday wasn't a normal day.

In a move that experts are

calling nearly unprecedented, the Hillsborough County schools and teachers' union have joined forces with a nonprofit Florida voucher group to help train private school teachers.

Step Up for Students — which runs the state's tax credit voucher program — plans to spend at least \$100,000 on classes for teachers who serve its scholarship students, among the county's most economically disadvantaged children. The

school district and union will provide space in the jointly developed Center for Technology and Education.

"Bottom line is these are our children, they are disadvantaged children, and they often return to our public schools," said Jean Clements, president of the Hillsborough Classroom Teachers' Association. "I want them to get the best possible education, wherever they get it."

Most of the children, who receive up to \$3,950 a year in tuition under the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, aren't going to ritzy private schools. They are

attending cash-strapped startups like Bible Truth Ministries in Tampa, or other schools that have struggled to keep their doors open during the economic downturn, said Step Up spokesman Adam Emerson.

Around 23,400 students were served last year in the Florida voucher program, which gives corporations a dollar-for-dollar tax credit on donations. The new training program is funded by contributions from the Walton Family Foundation and John Kirtley, the chairman of Step Up for Students.

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Schools, voucher program to join

Scholarship students tend to be among the poorest students in their districts and must be eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch under federal guidelines to qualify, said Step Up president Doug Tuthill. They often spend time in both private and public schools.

"It's in everyone's best interest to make sure they're exposed to the very best teaching, regardless of where they are," he said.

Administrators at Tampa Bay Christian Academy say their teachers are well prepared; virtually all are state certified and most have masters' degrees. But they earn far less money than their public school counterparts, and need all the help they can get in teaching those with learning disabilities or other disadvantages.

"We're super excited about it," said operations director Natasha Sherwood. "This gives teachers the opportunity to stay up to date and move forward as much as they want."

For years, public school advocates in Hillsborough and elsewhere have said voucher systems drain funds from the public system and put children in substandard learning environments.

Florida voucher advocates say it's not so; the state spends less on vouchers than the average cost of a public school student. And they point to a recent Northwestern University study that showed scholarship students kept up with their peers academically last year.

None of that arguing was heard Wednesday, though.

Superintendent MaryEllen Elia said the district feels a responsibility for every student in the county, whether they're in a private school or a public one.

"Ultimately, we all want to help teachers get better, wherever they're teaching our kids," she said.

Such language is a sharp break from past politics, said Michael J. Petrilli, vice president for national programs and policy at the conservative Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

"I think it's important to find some common ground," he said. "A lot of credit goes to John Kirtley and his organization for bringing the heat down on some of the rhetoric. I think this could be helpful."

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