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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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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