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School for migrant children gets \$200K gift to expand

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WIMAUMA — An elementary charter school, which strives to give the children of migrant workers a future beyond the fields, is \$200,000 closer to meeting a huge goal — adding a sixth, seventh and eighth grade.

And the school has a *Times* reader to thank.

In December, the *Times* published a story about the RCMA Wimauma Academy, which connects with children in the county's most invisible population through small class sizes and home visits in a language and culture they understand. The concept has been so successful that this June, the school's FCAT score rose from a C to an A.

John Kirtley read the story

and couldn't believe he hadn't heard of the school. The parental choice advocate chairs Step Up for Students, which administers the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship for low-income students. He believes education should not be one-size-fits-all, but instead customized to meet the needs of a student.

He says the academy perfectly matches up with his mission. It goes to sometimes extreme lengths to meet the needs of migrant worker families, from its operating hours to a liaison who helps parents with issues from immigration to health. Parents and teachers fear that outside this nurturing environment, kids could slip through the cracks of a bigger school.

School officials set a goal of

\$1.6 million, to build a six-classroom facility for middle school students that includes a multi-purpose cafeteria, media center and administrative offices. Before Kirtley got involved, the school had raised \$600,000 toward its goal.

Kirtley will add \$100,000 and has brought in the Walton Family Foundation, which will match that donation. But even more significant are the connections this partnership will bring the school. Kirtley plans to tap into a nationwide network of foundations that share his goals. "I'm very hopeful we can rapidly find the rest," he said.

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