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Program helps open doors to private schools

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When Gina Padró switched from public to private school last year, she wasn't scared. In fact, Gina, now a sixth-grader at Shores Christian Academy in Ocala, made the choice herself with her parents' support.

However, the state also gave Gina a boost: She is one of about 33,000 students in Florida and 697 in Marion County who receive tuition assistance through the Step Up For Students program, which helps low-income families send their children to private school.

Step Up is funded through the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program, which allows private corporations to donate money to the program instead of paying corporate income taxes to the state. Companies may pay up to 75 percent of their tax this way. Another program, the Carrie Meek Foundation Inc., is funded through the FTC program but benefits only students in South Florida.

Since Step Up's 2001 inception, corporations have contributed more than \$700 million to the program. Although no contributing corporations are based in Ocala, among those that have a local presence include AT&T, Lowe's and Walgreen Co.

To be eligible, students must be entering kindergarten or first grade or, like Gina, be transferring from public to private school. Students are selected through an online application process, and administrators give preference to renewal applicants.

In Marion County, the number of students enrolled in the program has nearly doubled in the past three years, and more may be coming: The 2011-2012 online application portal for new students opened this month.

Meanwhile, the number of Marion schools involved in the program has increased from 13 in the 2007-2008 school year to 22 in 2010-2011. All of the Marion County private schools that currently have scholarship students reapplied for FTC program eligibility this year through the Florida Department of Education.

'A blessing for us'

Gina said the small class sizes at Shores Christian prompted her to apply there instead of starting at Lake Weir Middle School. In-



Gina Padró is able to attend Shores Christian Academy because of the Step Up For Students scholarship program.

cluding her, Shores Christian has 51 students enrolled in Step Up — 40 percent of the school's enrollment.

"When I first came here, I knew almost everybody," Gina said. "I feel more comfortable here."

Gina's mother, Patricia, said she values Shores' Christian-based teachings, its uniforms and its small classes. So, after a friend whose daughter once attended Shores Christian told her about Step Up, she went online and applied.

"It [Step Up for Students] has helped my daughter so much," said Padro, who works as a certified nursing assistant and a convenience store clerk. "For children that need to go to private schools, it's very important. For people who can't afford the tuition, they can still send their children there."

Step Up scholarships are need-based. For a new applicant in a family of four to receive the maximum scholarship — \$4,106 this year — the family income must be no more than \$3,446 per month. For scholarship renewals that income standard is adjusted and,

depending on income, the student may be awarded a full or partial scholarship. New applicants can receive only the full, not partial, scholarship amount, so they must meet that income requirement.

Jon Davison said it "just wouldn't be possible" to send his three children to Shores Christian if it weren't for the program.

"It's been a blessing for us," said Davison, who teaches history and physical education at Shores Christian.

Like Gina and her family, Davison said he and his wife, who teaches English at Shores Christian, value the one-on-one interaction between students and teachers that the private school environment offers.

"It's not that we have a problem with public schools," he said. "You just have more of a relationship with your teacher [at private schools]."

Saving money or hurting schools?

Some question whether the Legislature should support the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program, considering the state's financial woes and cuts to public education.

School funding is based on the number of students in attendance, so funding to public schools is cut when students leave for private school.

“The quote-unquote fact that the program saves the state money is a myth,” said Mark Pudlow, spokesman for the Florida Education Association, a union that represents teachers.

Pudlow said that when a student body size is reduced by only a handful of students, the state gives less money to that school — but the school’s operating costs basically remain the same.

“They still have to turn on the electricity in that school. They still have to provide transportation. They don’t get to take a teacher away. They don’t get to take a bus away,” he said. “The costs will still be there; it’s just the money isn’t gonna be there.”

Pudlow also said that public schools undergo more scrutiny from the state than private schools do, with more standardized tests given at public schools and teachers being measured according to students’ performance.

“Why is it that one tax dollar — the one that I give — has to go to a public school, and the one that Mr. Corporate puts in goes to a group that nobody does any scrutiny of?” he asked. “That’s a double standard for tax dollars. They ought to be given out in the same manner.”

However, one research agency indicates the FTC program actually saves the state money. According to a March 2010 report from the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability, the Legislature’s research arm, the FTC program saved Florida about \$36.2 million in the 2008-2009 fiscal year.

That amount is the difference between the amount — \$118.4 million — not sent to public schools and the amount — \$82.2 million — in forgone revenue tax.

That’s a significant savings, said Deborah Brodsky, director of the Florida Tax-Watch Center for Educational Performance and Accountability.

While operating cost savings on an individual public school basis may not be obvious, she said, the savings are at the state level.

“There’s 33,000 students in the program — that has an impact on class-size reduction,” said Brodsky.

A resolution regarding the legality of a similar tax-credit scholarship program in Arizona also may be hushing Florida critics.

Earlier this month, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against Arizona taxpayers who said a state program unlawfully awarded corporation-donated money that belonged to Arizona to religious private schools.

Justices rejected the challenge in a 5-4 ruling, saying taxpayers didn’t have to contribute to the program themselves.

Step Up For Students president Doug Tuthill said that even though Step Up and the Arizona program are different, the recent court ruling further emphasizes the legality of parents’ choices to educate their children in the way they feel best suits them.

According to <http://stepupforstudents.org>, 81 percent of Step Up schools are faith-based.

“There have been consistent [U.S.] Supreme Court rulings saying parents are allowed to educate their children in a religious school provided it’s the parent’s choice and not the government’s choice,” Tuthill said. “I think the key is it’s not being coerced by the government. It’s really the decision of the individual.”

Popular in Marion

As far as Marion County goes, it’s clear more parents are taking advantage of the options that Step Up offers.

During the 2007-2008 school year, 353 students in 13 Marion private schools were enrolled, according to Adam Emerson, the program’s spokesman. Today, in the 2010-2011 school year, 697 students are enrolled in 22 private schools.

That 97 percent growth rate in enrollment outpaced the state for the same period, Emerson said.

Not to mention there were about 7,000 students statewide on the program’s waiting list last year, with 140 in Marion, according to Emerson. Because the state caps the number of tax credits corporations can receive for their contributions, not every eligible student who applies for the program can be admitted.

“Families are becoming more aware of us than ever before,” Emerson said.

He said the program does not aim to discourage public school attendance, as every student learns differently.

“Our program exists because we don’t believe every school can teach every child,” Emerson said. “Low-income students can struggle in even the best schools.”

To hold accountable schools that accept scholarship students, last year the Legislature began requiring administrators to give their scholarship students standardized, norm-referenced tests to track academic progress. Also, it began requiring schools that received at least \$250,000 in scholarship revenue to provide financial reports to show how they are spending the money.

Parents and students also can vote with their feet: The full scholarship amount, \$4,106, isn’t enough to cover the cost at some private schools. The average parent

with a scholarship student still pays about \$1,000 per school year, Emerson said.

“They’ll move their children if they don’t feel like the school is meeting their needs,” Tuthill said. “That puts a lot of pressure on the schools to be very student-focused.”

Kevin Christian, public information officer for Marion County public schools, said he wasn’t very familiar with the program but that if it gives parents more choices, the scholarship isn’t a bad thing.

“We respect the right that parents have to make the decision they feel [is] right for their children,” Christian said. “If children can benefit from an environment that their parents feel is more appropriate for them, then sure.”

Future funding

At the end of the current legislative session, in early May, the Legislature will have decided the scholarship’s per-pupil value for 2011-2012.

Since 2001, that value has fluctuated. Although the Legislature used to determine the value, today it is based on a percentage of the Florida Education Finance Program.

The FEFP is the money the Legislature spends to operate public schools. This year the FTC program was indexed at 60 percent of the FEFP — meaning a full scholarship (\$4,106) was 60 percent of the Legislature’s 2010-2011 budget per public school student of \$6,844.

In 2009-10, a full scholarship was \$3,950, or about 58 percent of the \$6,863 per-pupil budget.

That percentage is determined by the amount of money that companies donate (in lieu of state tax) to the program. Tuthill said the program’s goal is to try its best to meet the needs of the community no matter the money allotted.

“If more parents want to participate in the program, it will grow,” Tuthill said. “If more parents don’t want to participate, it won’t.”

Despite its popularity and growth, the program has ample room to grow. He said most students who benefit from Step Up received free or reduced-priced lunch in public schools, and there about 1.2 million of those students in Florida.

“We’re barely scratching the surface of that population,” he said.

Gina, who considers herself “lucky” to be a scholarship recipient, said she hopes to become a registered nurse someday. She said she thinks the private-school environment will help her achieve that goal.

“I know I can be something big in my career,” Gina said. “I just want to help people.”

Her mother said she doesn’t know where Gina would be without the program.