Students celebrate school choice

By Elizabeth Wilson

ORLANDO | More than 300 St. Andrew Catholic School students filed into the gymnasium carrying posters and signs for a school choice pep rally Sept. 16. In large letters and bright colors, their posters displayed their love for their school and thanked legislators for programs such as the Florida Tax Credit scholarship that make it possible to attend the school.

“The people in this parish would never ever be able to afford to send their children to their own parish school, and this school is built for them,” said Kathleen Kiley, principal. “In addition, we feel that any parent who wants a Catholic education for their children should have the opportunity to do it.”

The Florida Tax Credit program helps children from low-income families by providing scholarships that allow them to attend a school that better meets their individual needs, and empowers parents to make the best educational choice for their child. It is a cause very close to the heart of state Sen. Kelli Stargel, who remembers making those decisions for her own five children, each of whom had separate needs.

“My five kids are very different. They don’t all learn the same way and so they didn’t all go to the same school. And because my five kids were different, I know that everybody else has kids that are different and likes different choices.”

St. Andrew Catholic School community, Florida Alliance for Choices in Education, Step Up for Students, and the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops honored Stargel at the pep rally for her work and advocacy for school choice. She announced her intention to continue to fight for equal education opportunities as long as she remained in office.

“I don’t think any student should be limited by where they live or what their income is or what their abilities are,” she said. “They should all have the opportunity to achieve whatever they want in their life.”

James Herzog, associate director for education at the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops, underscored the importance of school choice programs. He said Florida’s Catholic high schools have a graduation rate of 99 percent, compared to 75 percent for public schools. Together with consistently above-average test scores, this opens a lot of doors for graduating seniors entering the workforce or choosing college, and can help break the cycle of poverty for low-income families.

In talking with family members who attend other schools, seventh-grader Iliana can see the advantages of attending St. Andrew Catholic School.

“I like my teachers a lot and I like being able to be in the same class with most of my friends. I like the type of work that we do. I definitely learn a lot more here.”

Her classmate François agreed and added, “All the teachers, faculty and staff are really nice and so are the students. They teach you a lot here. The teachers understand you.”