HELPING AREA PARENTS

STEP UP FOR EDUCATION

Scholarship program for low-income families fueled by $2M donation by Lewis Bear Co.

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An Escambia County private school teamed up with a statewide scholarship program Thursday afternoon to help qualifying low-income families apply for scholarships to send their children to a grade school of their choice.

The Dixon School of the Arts hosted the event in conjunction with Florida nonprofit Step Up For Students, which administers the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program. Pensacola-based Lewis Bear Co. made a $2 million donation to the program and sponsored Thursday’s event to encourage qualifying families to complete applications for the 2014-15 school year.

From 2:30 to 6 p.m., Step Up For Students employees helped

See STEP UP » 8A
Step Up

Continued » 3A

parents apply for up to $4,880 in annual scholarships at the Dixon School of the Arts Fellowship Hall.

The scholarships could be used to attend a private school or to attend an out-of-district public school.

David Bear, vice president of the Lewis Bear Co., said his beverage distribution company’s donation will provide nearly 400 scholarships for low-income Florida students.

“Education is important to our community. There are more opportunities for people who have a quality education,” he said. “This program allows families who otherwise couldn’t afford a private school to send their children there.”

Pensacola resident Meriquita Jones said she attended Thursday’s event to apply for scholarships for her daughters Damiya, 13, and Dаниya, 9, so they could attend the Dixon School of the Arts. Jones said her family was paying out of pocket for rocky to attend the school, but wanted both her daughters to enjoy the educational benefits her youngest was receiving.

“She’s very excited. Every day she talks about what she learned,” Jones said. “(And) within the week she started going to private school there, she wanted to be more lady-like.”

Ashley Evans McDuffie, a marketing and events manager for Step Up For Students, said the scholarships enabled low-income families to shop for the best school for their child without the expense of moving or the full cost of private school tuition.

“Sometimes, the public school doesn’t work for a student for whatever reason,” she said. “We believe that every child should have an opportunity to find a school that best fits where they learn best.”

LuTimothy May, executive director of Dixon School of the Arts, said he agreed with McDuffie.

“Every child doesn’t learn the same way,” he said. “My child may not learn well in a school that has 2,000 or 1,500 students. I may need that 60 or 100 student population for my child to learn, or I may need other special needs. Step Up For Students, what it does is give that parent the option.”

The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program is available to students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and who are entering elementary grades or have attended a public school the prior year.

Currently, more than 800 students in Escambia County benefit from a Step Up For Students scholarship. Nineteen local schools participate in the program.

Parents interested in applying for the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program should visit stepupforstudents.org.