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Ormond firm elects to redirect taxes to help students

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BY BOB KOSLOW, BUSINESS WRITER 

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ORMOND BEACH -- Almost 700 Florida students from low-income families will get financial help to attend a private or out-of-district school thanks to S.R. Perrott Inc. deciding to send more than \$3 million of its state tax burden into a scholarship fund.

The company will still pay its state taxes, but earlier this year, the 50-year-old local beer and wine distributor told the Department of Revenue that it wants \$3.088 million of its taxes to go into the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program.

The state-approved nonprofit agency Step Up For Students will use that money -- and other corporate redirections of tax payments -- for scholarships to assist poor children attending kindergarten through 12th grade at alternative schools, including students in the Volusia-Flagler area.

"Through this partnership, we are able to support equal educational opportunities for all Florida's children," said Michele Connors, president of the private, family-run S.R. Perrott.

The 2001 state Legislature created the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program. Corporations and businesses redirecting all or part of their state taxes fund the program rather than the money being placed in the general fund.

"We learned about this program at the Beer Industry of Florida meeting. We tried it last year but the state had already met its quota," said Eva Connors McMullin, S.R. Perrott's marketing director and Michele's daughter. "It's a great idea giving us the option to direct our monthly tax payments to help low-income families with their education as opposed to not having an option of where the money goes."

The Legislature each year caps the amount directed into the program. The cap amount was increased this fiscal year, which began July 1, to \$229 million from \$119 million last year. About 100 companies redirected their taxes for last school year's program.

"It's a very popular program. In just a couple of weeks we reached the \$229 million," said John East, director of policy for Step Up For Students. "We even had to close off accepting applications last Friday because we had signed up more than 50,000 families."

The scholarship target is 50,000 this school year.

The program funded 40,248 scholarships last school year with a waiting list of 13,000 families. There were 1,400 participating schools. More than two-thirds of the scholarships went to African-American and Hispanic students, East said. The average scholarship was for \$4,335.

Volusia County students received 1,462 scholarships last school year while 198 students in Flagler County received a scholarship, East said. There are 35 private schools participating in the program in Volusia County and four private schools in Flagler County.

Application information and forms are available online at stepupforstudents.org.

Scholarships are awarded on a first-come-first-served basis. Qualifying families cannot earn a household income greater than 185 percent above the poverty level. For a family of four, the maximum qualifying household income is \$42,600 a year.

"We're not in competition with the public schools, but want to offer parents in low-income families a choice of where to send their children to school that is best for them," East said. "We target low-income students because they have the hardest struggles to get a quality education."