Hundreds of schoolkids gathered at the Tampa Theatre Thursday afternoon for a showcase of the talents of students participating in Florida’s Tax Credit Scholarship program.

Step Up for Students’ Celebration of Achievement lured students of all ages from around the state to a two-hour show of singing, dancing and celebrating the opportunities given by participating in the Tax Credit Scholarship program.

The Florida Tax Credit program was created by the Legislature in 2001 to help provide educational opportunities to low-income children in kindergarten through 12th-grade. With these scholarships, students are able to attend private schools or out-of-district public schools better suited to their individual needs.

“There are some kids who need the environment that can’t be offered by the [school] district,” said SUFS President Doug Tuthill. “Step up [aims] to empower parents of limited means ... who couldn’t normally send their kids to the best school.”

Tampa-based Step Up for Students provides Tax Credit Scholarships to nearly 70,000 low-income Florida students in grades K-12. The scholarship program is funded by corporations that earn dollar-for-dollar tax credits when they redirect up to 100 percent of their Florida income tax liability.

Thursday’s event served as a “thank you” to donors who have kept the program alive for nearly 14 years, despite harsh criticisms from teachers’ unions and other education groups across the state who view the scholarship program as a detraction from public school funding.

“What better way of saying ‘thank you’ to someone than showing them you’ll succeed?” said Rylee Johnson, a tax credit scholar and junior at Tampa’s Academy of the Holy Names. Johnson has participated in the Tax Credit Scholarship program for several years -- she has dreams to attend Marist University in New York or the University of Florida when she graduates high school.
Students prepared musical numbers, dance pieces, sang songs to show off their talents to donors -- from singing the national anthem to tap dancing to “Singing in the Rain,” the tax-credit scholarship students showed they’re much more than just students -- they’re gifted in art, music and in song.

“You students have been blessed,” said retired Tampa Bay Buccaneers fullback Mike Alstott, who keynoted the event. Alstott urged students to keep working hard for their dreams and to always keep studying to stay on the road of academic success.

“Work hard each and every day,” he said. “And get your education. Step Up for Students has given you the opportunity to be in a great environment.”