TAMPA — Jorge Perez remembers the first time he walked through the black iron gates of Academy Prep of Tampa, a private middle school in the heart of Ybor City. Like the Cuban coffee wafting from the bakery next door, the smell of opportunity permeated the air.

“It was very different from the other middle schools I had seen and the atmosphere was buzzing,” said Jorge, a rising sixth-grader at the time. “It felt like a place where I could grow.”

He left the academy three years later as the eighth-grade class valedictorian, earning an academic scholarship to Phillips Exeter Academy, the elite New Hampshire boarding school known for its Ivy League connections and distinguished former students, including Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg.
Exeter — and Jorge — didn’t disappoint. He graduated in 2012 with yet another scholarship and became the first Academy Prep alumnus to attend Columbia University in New York City. Today, the 19-year-old junior is studying philosophy and economics with an eye toward law school while his little brother, Julian, another Academy Prep graduate, follows in his footsteps at Phillips Exeter in the fall.

It’s an amazing journey that began with the power of choice.

Thanks to a tax-credit scholarship through Step Up for Students, Jorge’s family wasn’t limited to their ZIP code or their budget when they went looking for the right middle school. Instead, they got to choose a school based on how it served their needs—and stoked their dreams.

It’s a choice more families are opting for, with nearly 2,500 Hillsborough County students using the scholarships at 74 participating private schools during the 2013-14 school year. Statewide, Step Up has awarded more than 60,000 scholarships to families in need.

Academy Prep was founded in 2003 to serve low-income students. Most of them are black or Hispanic, graduating with grades that get them into top public and private high schools and, later, highly regarded public and private colleges.

All of the students receive the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, a state program for qualifying families that pays a portion of the academy’s $16,000-plus annual tuition. The rest of the money comes from private donors and foundations that have come together with one mission: to dramatically change the lives of low-income children through the power of education.

“It is incumbent upon us as a society to give everyone an opportunity,” said Academy Prep Head of School Lincoln Tamayo, a Harvard graduate who grew up in Tampa and went to kindergarten a few blocks from the academy.

Academy Prep, and its sister school in St. Petersburg, are modeled after the recently disbanded Nativity Miguel Network of Schools, acclaimed nonprofit schools that catered to economically disadvantaged children. The network’s tradition of excellence continues at Academy Prep, where about 80 percent of the school’s graduates go on to private high schools, including Exeter and, closer to home, Tampa Prep.

About 82 percent head to college, the majority four-year schools including top-tier institutions like Columbia University, where Jorge contemplates a career in law or finance.

“I used to wonder, ‘How will my kids go to college?’” said his mother, Sophia Flores, a real estate broker who sometimes worked three jobs to make ends meet. “I don’t know how to express truly, every day, the blessings of the academy. They are changing these kids’ lives forever.”

When Jorge didn’t seem challenged at his public magnet school, Flores began searching for options. She heard about the impressive college preparatory program at Academy Prep, but the divorced mom never dreamed she could afford private school tuition.

Then she learned she qualified for financial help through Step Up For Students. Soon after, Jorge applied to Academy Prep, where he had to pass a skills test and turn in essays — including one written by his mom about how she expected her son to succeed.

Once enrolled, Jorge, like all Academy Prep students, had to maintain good grades or face expulsion. Flores had to agree to volunteer at the school. Both had to commit to 11-hour school days, 11 months a year
including some Saturdays. Sometimes, Jorge would go to school before sunrise and come home when it was dark again.

It wasn’t easy in the beginning and, soon, Jorge had a change of heart.

“I do remember wanting to switch schools midway through the year,” he said. “At times, the work was overwhelming and very tough.”

But he stuck it out and the effort paid off with an offer from Exeter. Academy Prep gifted the family with plane tickets so they could see the school before making any big decisions. Exeter administrators rolled out the red carpet.

“They treated us like millionaires,” Flores recalled. When the family left, she asked her son, “What do you want to do?”

He knew it the moment he stepped on Exeter’s 223-year-old campus.

“Mom, this is where I want to be,” Jorge told her.

“Leaving home was very difficult,” Jorge said. “But at the same time it was very liberating and exciting. I felt that I had achieved something and this only motivated me to continue to work. … It just always felt right.”

Sherri Ackerman is a public relations manager for Step Up For Students, which helps administer the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship and the new Personal Learning Scholarship Account, which is for families with children with special needs. To see if you qualify for these programs, go to www.StepUpForStudents.com or call (877) 735-7837.