



STEP UP FOR STUDENTS



2016-17 Parent Handbook

A guide to the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship

Compiled by **Step Up for Students**



Welcome to Step Up For Students

Thank you for your interest in this unique education option, and you should thank the people you elect to make laws and the companies that are stepping up for your students. The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship was created in 2001 with the sole objective of providing children from low-income families a learning option they would otherwise not be able to afford, and last year it served 78,000 students in roughly 1,500 private schools throughout the state. This program depends on the contributions of companies, which are then awarded state tax credits.

Children learn in different ways, and Step Up For Students wants to help assure that students from less affluent households have as many options as possible to succeed in school.

The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program is run by private nonprofit groups called Scholarship Funding Organizations (SFOs), which are approved and closely monitored by the state Department of Education (DOE). We are an SFO called Step Up For Students and we have scholarship offices in Jacksonville and Tampa, and serve all Florida counties.



The application process and committing to a school

Step Up scholarships are available to students whose household income meets the federal standard for the free and reduced price meals in the National School Lunch Program up to 260 percent of the poverty level. The higher incomes may result in a pro-rated scholarship of 75% or 50% of the total possible \$5,886. Renewing applicants and the lowest income new families are given priority. New families that are above 185% of the Federal poverty level will be placed on a waiting list until the lowest income families have been awarded. The simplest way to apply for a scholarship is to visit our website, <http://www.stepupforstudents.org>.

Each family is required to verify household income for each year the student remains on the program. In reviewing your application, Step Up For Students will consider all the people who live in your household and all the income that is derived from the people who live in the household. Income sources include: monthly gross income from pay checks, cash wages, unemployment, Social Security Income/Disability for every household member (including children), child support, any other income. Completing this process is the responsibility of the parent/guardian, not the school. Once a student has been approved for the program, you will receive a Scholarship Award Letter. The next step is to formally select a private school. Scholarships are not awarded to private schools, scholarships are awarded to students. The state DOE determines which private schools are eligible to receive Tax Credit Scholarships and a list of those private schools is available at the department's website, <http://www.floridaschoolchoice.org>. Once you choose a private school, take your award letter to the private school you've chosen. That letter will allow us to match the student and the private school and begin scholarship payments.

Please make sure this step is completed. If you enroll your child before your application has been received and prior to an eligibility determination, or before we receive a Student Confirmation Form (SCF), you will be responsible for any tuition and fees due and may not qualify for future scholarship funding.

What the scholarship pays for

Step Up For Students will provide up to \$5,886 to pay for your child's tuition and fees at an eligible private school. Step Up For Students also provides a transportation scholarship of up to \$500 each year that is available to students who choose to attend a public school in a different county than their home. For the private school scholarship, Step Up For Students will pay the full \$5,886 or the published cost of tuition and fees at the selected private school — **whichever is less**. For students awarded a scholarship after the beginning of the school year, the actual amount of the scholarship award will be **pro-rated** based on the date of the award letter or the child's actual start date in a private school — **whichever is later**. The scholarship can only fund actual attendance in a given school year after the date of award.



Also, be aware that you cannot postpone the scholarship. You must find an eligible private school for your student as soon as you receive your scholarship award letter. Failure to meet the deadline stated on the Award Letter could result in loss of the scholarship. Schools that participate in the scholarship program may not charge a different rate for scholarship students. The same published tuition schedule must apply to all students, whether they are on scholarships or paying privately. Likewise, Step Up For Students can't pay for any fees that are not included on the published fee schedule provided to all prospective parents.

Many private schools charge more than the \$5,886 scholarship, which is an amount that is limited by law. In some cases, private schools may decide to provide scholarship students with supplemental financial assistance at their own discretion. In most cases, parents will be required to pay the difference between the scholarship and the full tuition and fees. Those payments are not discretionary. Every family must pay the difference between the school's total tuition and fees, the Step Up For Students scholarship and any financial aid or supplemental scholarships the school may provide. There are no exceptions to this rule, and a student may lose the Step Up For Students scholarship for failure to comply.

How the scholarship payments are made

Scholarship checks are made payable to the primary and/or secondary parent/guardian provided on the application but are sent directly to the private school. The parent or guardian listed on the check must personally sign the check at the private school. There are no exceptions to this rule, and the law establishing this scholarship is clear: "A participant who fails to comply with this paragraph forfeits the scholarship." The failure of the designated parent to sign the check within five business days after being notified by the school or within the time specified by the private school's policy could also result in the loss of your scholarship. In some extreme cases, a power of attorney may be accepted in place of the parent signature.

The checks are disbursed in four different installments: approximately September, November, February and May. A few weeks before each installment, each private school is provided a report with your child's name and the scholarship amount in order to confirm ongoing attendance during that period. The private school must electronically verify that the information is correct and return the verification to Step Up For Students. Parents, please note when signing the scholarship check that the back of the check should be printed with the phrase "For Deposit Only" and the location of that deposit should be the school's account.

Student behavior and obligations for the scholarship

Scholarship students must follow all academic and discipline policies of the private school they attend. Private schools have the right to expel or suspend students if their published policies are not followed. We recommend you carefully review those policies and procedures to ensure your children remains eligible for the scholarship. Step Up For Students does not govern private school policies regarding the retention of students due to academic or discipline failures. The third time a student is expelled from an eligible private school, he or she will lose the scholarship permanently, with no option to renew. Should a student be expelled due to a violent event, the student's scholarship will be revoked immediately. (This will not affect the scholarship of any siblings.)

We have found that some students need help in making the adjustment to a new private school environment. The courses may be more advanced and difficult. There may be more homework. The private school may have tougher enforcement of rules, stricter discipline procedures and less tolerance for unruly or disrespectful behavior. We urge parents to remain in constant contact with the private school, its counselors and teachers, and to seek tutoring or mentoring services that might be available.

Scholarship students are also expected to maintain regular school attendance and be in good standing with the private school's existing attendance policy. If you plan to withdraw your student during the school year, please notify the private school prior to withdrawal so they may notify Step Up For Students.

Moving to another eligible private school

One of the benefits of this scholarship program is that if you are not satisfied with a private school, you can always go to another one. You may transfer your scholarship child at any time to another eligible, participating private school as long as you have no outstanding financial accounts at the previous private school, including unsigned scholarship checks.

If you plan to withdraw your student during the school year, please notify your current private school prior to withdrawal. The private school your student is leaving must then complete an online form that confirms the student is

planning to leave, and submit that form to Step Up For Students within five business days of being notified that the student is leaving. The Step Up For Students will not transfer a scholarship until it has that confirmation and until the private school confirms the household has no outstanding balance due.

The new private school you choose must fill out an SCF for your student and submit it to Step Up For Students electronically. This process may include a final payment to the private school the student is leaving, which must be signed following the check cashing policy. If Step Up For Students has overpaid the private school for the student the private school will be invoiced for the overpayment.

Renewing the scholarship or adding a brother or sister

Students who are currently on the scholarship have first priority to keep their scholarship each year, but they must also meet the renewal guidelines. Those guidelines include:

- ✓ Your student actively used the scholarship throughout this current school year.
- ✓ Your income meets the financial standards. The income for a renewal family must not exceed 230 percent of the federal poverty guideline, and that number is updated each year.
- ✓ If your child was in grades 3-10, he or she must have taken an approved standardized test with results provided by the school to you and to the state's third-party research entity.
- ✓ You or your child has not violated the law governing this program or established policies and procedures for participation.

A checklist for scholarship families

- ✓ Parents must complete the renewal process within the deadline to be confirmed for the new school year..
- ✓ Parents must notify the public school district in which you live that your child will be participating in the program.
- ✓ Parents must give the private school ample notice if you plan to withdraw your child during the school year.
- ✓ Parents must notify Step Up For Students if you are moving, whether it is within the area or outside the area your currently reside in.
- ✓ Parents must not fall behind on any payments owed to the private school.
- ✓ The private school may suspend or expel your child if you fail to pay tuition, and Step Up For Students will not transfer a scholarship if money is still owed.

Actions that lead to a loss of the scholarship

- ✓ Misrepresenting or withholding information on the scholarship application.
- ✓ Enrolling the child in a private school that is not eligible to participate.
- ✓ Expulsion from the private school
- ✓ Failure to regularly attend the private school.
- ✓ Failure of the parent to personally endorse the scholarship checks.
- ✓ Failure of the student to take a required nationally nor-referenced test.
- ✓ Failure to pay any tuition or fees not covered by the scholarship.
- ✓ Exceeding the household income limits established by the law.

Notify us if you move

If at any point you have a change of address, telephone, cell phone or E-mail address, you can update your information by logging into your account at <https://www.stepupforstudents.org>.