



STEP UP FOR STUDENTS

Florida's Parent and Community Involvement Organization



2020-21 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. The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship was created in 2001 with the sole objective of providing children from low-income families a learning option they may not otherwise be able to afford, and last year it served more than 100,000 students in roughly 2,300 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 overseen by private, nonprofit groups called Scholarship Funding Organizations (SFOs), which are approved and closely monitored by the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE). We are an SFO called Step Up For Students and we have scholarship offices in Jacksonville and St. Petersburg and serve all Florida counties.



Eligibility

Florida Tax Credit Scholarships are available to students whose household income is not more than 260 percent of the poverty level. The scholarship's value is determined by the student's grade level and the income of the student's household.

The maximum scholarship awards for the 2020-21 school year are based on the student's grade level and county of residence. Click [here](#) for more detail.

The award amount for the 2020-21 school year will be released in the spring of 2020.

Renewing applicants and the lowest income new families are given eligibility priority. New families with household incomes above 185% of the Federal poverty level will be placed on a waiting list until the renewing families and lowest income new families have been found eligible. The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship does not discriminate based on race, color, sex, disability, religion, nationality or political belief.

Each family is required to complete an application and verify their household income each year. Eligibility for the 2020-21 school year is based on the gross, annualized income of all members of the household. Examples of income include: income from pay checks, cash wages, unemployment, Social Security Income/Disability for every household member (including children), child support, any other income. Any misrepresentation of the information provided to Step Up For Students for eligibility purposes will result in the revocation of the student's scholarship and could be punishable as a crime.

It is the responsibility of the parent/guardian, *not the school*, to complete the application and provide any documents required by Step Up For Students. **You should NEVER share your Step Up For Students account login with anyone, including representatives from the school you have chosen. AND, only you, the parent or guardian of the student/s you are applying for, should complete the application process and provide the required validating documentation.**

When you complete the Step Up For Students application, you are agreeing to or authorizing the following:

- You authorize Step Up For Students “to access information needed for income eligibility determination and verification held by other state or federal agencies, including the Department of Revenue, the Department of Children and Families, the Department of Education, the Department of Economic Opportunity, and the Agency for Health Care Administration.” s1002.385,7(g)
- You authorize Step Up For Students to share your contact information with organizations that want to provide you with information about parental empowerment, school choice and candidates for public office. Your consent or lack of consent will have no effect on my scholarship eligibility.
- You authorize Step Up For Students to deliver prerecorded messages, including, but not limited to, application status updates and other pertinent scholarship information, to the home telephone numbers or the mobile telephone numbers that you provide in the scholarship application. You understand that you are not required to provide your consent as a condition of purchasing any goods or services, and that your consent or lack of consent will have no effect on my scholarship eligibility.
- You authorize Step Up For Students to deliver text messages. In addition to any entry, submission, subscription or other fee of which you are notarized, your carrier’s Messaging and Data rates may apply to your entry or submission message, our confirmation and all subsequent SMS correspondence.

We will not be liable for any delays in the receipt of any SMS messages as delivery is subject to effective transmission from your network operator. SMS message services are provided on an as-is basis.

Data obtained from you in connection with this SMS service may include your cell phone number, your carrier’s name, and the date, time and content of your messages. We may use this information to contact you and to provide the services you request from us.

If at any time now or in the future, you elect to cancel, you can unsubscribe by texting ‘STOP’ to 77453.

- You certify that the information presented is true and accurate to the best of your knowledge and belief. You understand that providing false representations constitutes an act of fraud. False, misleading or incomplete information may result in the denial of the scholarship application or revocation of a scholarship award.

Choosing a school

Once a student has been approved for the scholarship the next step is to select an eligible, participating private school. To find private schools that accept the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship [click here](#).

Once you choose a private school, take your award letter, which can be found by logging into your account, to the private school you’ve chosen. That letter will allow Step Up For Students to match the student and the eligible, participating private school and begin scholarship payments. Your student’s scholarship may be transferred to another eligible, participating private school during the school year if you need to make a change in the school your student is attending.

If you enroll your child before your application has been received or prior to being found eligible you will be responsible for paying any tuition and fees due and may not qualify for future scholarship funding.

What the scholarship pays for

In addition to attending an eligible, participating private school, the scholarship is available to provide \$750 per student, per year, to attend a public school in a district (county) that is different from the one where the student resides.

The scholarship will pay the maximum award amount OR the published cost of tuition and fees at the selected eligible, participating private school — **whichever is less**. Fees at an eligible, participating private school may include books, registration, transportation (offered by the school), uniforms (if required and purchased through the school), testing and other required fees.

For students awarded a scholarship after the beginning of the school year, the amount of the scholarship award will be **pro-rated** based on the date of the award or the student's first day at the eligible, participating private school — **whichever is later**.

Schools participating 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 may not pay for fees that are not included on the published fee schedule provided to all prospective parents.

Many eligible, participating private schools charge more than the value of the scholarship. In some cases, eligible, participating private schools may decide to provide scholarship students with supplemental financial assistance at their own discretion. Parents will be required to pay the difference between the value of the scholarship and the full tuition and fees.

The awarded scholarship has an expiration date. You must find an eligible, participating private school for your student as soon as you receive your scholarship award letter. Failure to meet the deadline stated on the award letter will result in loss of the scholarship.

Scholarship payments

The scholarship is paid by checks made payable to the primary and/or secondary parent/guardian stated on the application AND the school the parent/guardian has chosen. The checks are sent directly to the private school and the parent/guardian must go to the eligible, participating private school to sign the check. There are no exceptions to this rule. Failure of the designated parent to sign the check within the time specified by the private school's policy will result in the loss of your scholarship. In some extreme cases, a power of attorney for signing scholarship checks may be granted to someone other than the parent/guardian on the application. This person may not be affiliated, in any way, the eligible, participating private school.

The checks are mailed to the school four times a year; in September, December, 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.

Student behavior and scholarship requirements

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. If a student is expelled due to a violent event, the student's scholarship will be revoked immediately. This action will not affect the scholarship of the student's 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.

Transferring

One of the benefits of this scholarship program is that it transferable. If you are not satisfied with the eligible, participating private school you have chosen, you may find another one.

Before you remove your student from the school you should notify the school and understand the school's policy regarding transferring to another school. The school may require an early withdrawal payment, which will not be covered by Step Up For Students.

Step Up For Students will not transfer a scholarship until it has confirmation of the student's withdrawal from the school and notification from the new eligible, participating private school of the student's start date.

The transfer process may include a final payment to the private school the student is leaving. If a check is sent to that school, it must be signed by the parent/guardian listed on the check. If the school has been overpaid the school will be invoiced for the overpayment.

Helpful notes

Renewal guidelines

- ✓ The student actively used the scholarship throughout this current school year.
- ✓ The student's household income meets the financial standards. The income for a renewal family

- must not exceed 260 percent of the federal poverty guideline.
- ✓ A student in grades 3-10 must have taken a DOE approved, national, norm-referenced test or the statewide assessment with results provided by the school to the parent/guardian and the state's third-party research entity.
 - ✓ The student or the student's parent/guardian 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 notify the eligible, participating private school **before** withdrawing the student 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 you currently reside in.
- ✓ The private school may suspend or expel your child if you fail to pay tuition.

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 an eligible, participating private school for a third time.
- ✓ 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 norm-referenced test.

Contact Step Up For Students

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 [here](#).

Our service center is available Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. until 4:30 p.m. EST. Please call us with your questions at 877-735-7837 or email us at info@stepupforstudents.org.