



Rising to Meet the Challenge

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Message from our President	4
Mission	5
About Step Up For Students	5
Our History	6
Virtual Senior Celebration	8
Active Kids 2.0	9
Free Audible Books for Students	10
Step Up Name Change	11
Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Spotlight	12
Who We Serve	14
Test Results Are In	15
Gardiner Scholarship Expanded	16
Gardiner Scholarship Spotlight	18
Dollars to Scholars	20
Florida Tax Credit Scholarship	21
Hope Scholarship	22
Philanthropy	23
Hope Scholarship Spotlight	24
Fiscal Accountability	26
Gardiner Graduate Spotlight	27
Awards + Step Up Boards	29
Donor Events	30
Florida Tax Credit Graduate Spotlight	34
Reading Scholarship Spotlight	36

2019/20

STEP UP FOR
STUDENTS
ANNUAL REPORT



JEMEEMAH OLUMOYA
EIGHTH GRADER,
ST. JUDE CATHEDRAL
SCHOOL

Rising to Meet the Challenge

When schools opened in the fall of 2019, no one could have imagined what the spring would bring. A once-in-a-century pandemic was about to change the world as we knew it – and to shake up education along with it. By spring break, most children were home for what turned out to be the rest of the school year, finishing their schooling in front of computer screens. Teachers were asked to do the near-impossible. Their task was to completely change the way they taught, almost overnight.

Parents who normally worked at offices suddenly were working from their homes. Dining room tables became desks for both children and adults, and, in some cases, the entire family was under one roof the entire day. The word “Zoom” became a verb and a household name. For many, these video meetings were the only “face-to-face” connections with colleagues, friends and family. When and if we left our houses, masks became part of our daily wardrobe.

Step Up For Students was no different in having to adjust to the uncertain times. We quickly pivoted and looked at how we could better serve our scholarship families. We made payment processes easier for parents. We set

up resource pages to help parents, students and educators navigate the uncharted waters. We hosted more webinars and virtual meetings than ever before. And we created a virtual celebration for the Class of 2020.

The pandemic forced educators to be more flexible, and children across the country experienced dramatic changes in the way they were being taught. Some remained at brick-and-mortar schools, many turned to online instruction, others sought home education, while still others created their own combination. Through it all, the urgent push for flexibility underscored the dire need, and clear benefits, of education choice. Simply put: Education choice is vital.

Message from our president

I have spent my professional life working to improve public education, and I saw more change in 2020 than in my previous 43 years combined. Tragically, the driver of these changes is a horrific global pandemic that has disrupted all aspects of our lives.

Like most organizations, Step Up For Students had to adjust quickly to our new reality last spring. We closed our offices, and our IT team did an amazing job helping everyone quickly transition to working from home. Our families, donors, schools, and students also helped. Families patiently worked with our staff to understand which educational options might work best for their students and their family situation, and our donors did everything possible to ensure we would have sufficient scholarship funds for the fall of 2020. And they succeeded.

Incredibly, as the pandemic stretches into the upcoming 2020-21, we are forecasting that the combined enrollment in the

Florida Tax Credit and Family Empowerment Scholarship programs will grow by at least 20,000 students. An extraordinary accomplishment for our donors and families.

Our schools have also performed amazing feats. With sparse resources, our schools quickly shifted to virtual instruction in the spring and provided safe and effective on-campus instruction in the fall as well as maintaining their high-quality virtual programs.

Moving forward, many of the innovations our schools and families have implemented to adjust to the pandemic will become permanent improvements. High-quality virtual instruction will become more normative, as will hybrid instructional models that integrate online, on-campus, and homeschooling. The more flexible and customized teaching and learning strategies that have emerged during this pandemic are here to stay.



DOUG
TUTHILL

Moving forward, many of the innovations our schools and families have implemented to adjust to the pandemic will become permanent improvements.

In this year's Annual Report, you will read about some of the ways students, families, and schools turned challenges into improvement opportunities. At Step Up, we believe every event is an improvement opportunity. Apparently, our donors, families, and schools do, too.

Sincerely,

Doug Tuthill
President

Mission Statement

Step Up For Students empowers families to pursue and engage in the most appropriate learning options for their children, with an emphasis on families who lack the information and financial resources to access these options. By pursuing this mission, we help public education fulfill the promise of equal opportunity.



About Us

Step Up For Students is a state-approved nonprofit scholarship funding organization that helps administer five scholarships for Florida schoolchildren:

the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program (FTC) for lower income families, the Family Empowerment

Scholarship (FES) for lower income families, and The Gardiner Scholarship for children with certain special needs unique abilities, the Hope Scholarship for public school students who are bullied or victims of violence and the Reading Scholarship Accounts for public school students in third through fifth grade who struggle with reading.

Public education is rooted in the promise of equal educational opportunity, and nowhere is that covenant more relevant than in the lives of struggling or disadvantaged children.

These scholarships strengthen public education by offering options to struggling schoolchildren. We consider Step Up For Students a partner of public schools in giving all students the tools toward success. We do this by empowering parents through the scholarship programs so that they might have an equal opportunity to discover educational options that work best for their children.

History

Step Up has come a long way since the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program was created in 2001 and served 15,000 low-income students across Florida in its 2002-03 inaugural year. During the 2019-20 schoolyear, Step Up served 108,441 lower-income students on the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, 13,462 students with unique abilities through the Gardiner Scholarship, 438 bullied students with the Hope Scholarship, 6,759 public school students with the Reading Scholarship, and processed applications in partnership with the Florida Department of Education for more than 17,000 students who used the Family Empowerment Scholarship.

Since the first fundraising year in 2002-03, Step Up has raised more than \$5.2 billion to support scholarships for nearly 900,000 low-income students through our oldest program, the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship. Step Up has also served more than 60,000 students with special needs through the Gardiner Scholarship since 2015. Today, these two programs are the largest of their kind in the nation. Donor support has been critical to the success of these two programs.

Step Up also operates the Reading Scholarship for public school students struggling with literacy, the Hope Scholarships for bullied students and processes applications to determine eligibility for the state-funded Family Empowerment Scholarship. Between these five programs, Step Up served more than 140,000 students during the 2019-20 school year.

Each student who is served by these scholarships is on an educational path that would not otherwise be available to them. In turn, we cannot help but be excited by the steady growth in enrollment. For the upcoming 2020-21 school year, Step Up is on track to reach heights that no other state education choice program has achieved: awarding the 1 millionth scholarship through the 5 different programs.

**WE COULD NOT HAVE HELPED
SO MANY STUDENTS IN NEED
WITHOUT THE SUPPORT OF
OUR DEDICATED DONORS.**

2001

The Florida Legislature creates the Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship to give educational scholarships, worth \$3,500, to economically disadvantaged children in grades K-12. The program is capped at \$50 million. House sponsor Joe Negron said upon passage:

**"THIS PUTS THE
PARENTS IN CHARGE."**

The scholarship is increased to \$3,750 and the legislature adds an annual requirement for students to take a state-approved national norm-referenced test.

2006

saved taxpayers
\$38.9 million

2008

The Legislature raises the cap to \$118 million and increases the scholarship to \$3,950. The state Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA) reports the program saved taxpayers \$38.9 million in 2007-08.

2011

Evaluators find that scholarship students modestly outperformed low-income peers in public schools on standardized tests, concluding the improvements “are larger and more statistically significant than in the past year’s results.”

The Legislature passes a new a new school choice program called the Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts (PLSA) program for children with special needs.

2014

2015

The first year of the PLSA program begins with Step Up managing the accounts of more than 1,559 PLSA scholarships to children with special needs.

**1,500+ PLSA
SCHOLARSHIPS**

2018

The FTC program reaches a historic milestone with more than 108,098 students served.

108,098

2020

Step Up serves more than 140,000 students through its five different scholarship programs.

**140,000
STUDENTS**

FLORIDA TAX CREDIT SCHOLARSHIP (FTC)

The program is renamed the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship (FTC). The first state-commissioned evaluation reports students on the program in 2007-08 experienced learning gains at the same pace as all students nationally.

2010

The Legislature passes a major expansion to the program with the support of nearly half of the Democrats and a majority of the Black and Hispanic caucuses. The bill adds tax credits for alcoholic beverage excise, direct pay sales and use, and oil and gas severance taxes, and allows the program to grow with demand.

GARDINER SCHOLARSHIP HONORS SENATE PRESIDENT ANDY GARDINER

The PLSA program becomes the Gardiner Scholarship, honoring Senate President Andy Gardiner and his family for their advocacy of special needs children in Florida.

2016

2019

The Gardiner Scholarship exceeds 10,000 students with special needs, making it the largest education savings account program in the nation.

2009

Celebrating Our Seniors, Virtually

In recognition of the extraordinary achievements the Class of 2020 accomplished

this year, Step Up for Students hosted a virtual Senior Celebration to recognize the 4,445 scholars on May 21. The celebration was live-streamed on YouTube and united scholars, their families and educators, along with donors, legislators and Step Up leadership, as we celebrated an unforgettable milestone for a well-deserving senior class.

Pastor Robert Ward of Mt. Moriah Missionary Baptist Church opened the celebration with a moving invocation filled with words of gratitude and hope. Step Up For Students President Doug Tuthill then welcomed the graduates noting, "Most of you were born in 2002. That's also the year that our scholarship was born."

Gabriella Bueno, who has benefitted from the Florida Tax Credit scholarship for eight years expressed, "I have much to be grateful for, and I would personally like to thank Step Up For Students, the lawmakers who believe in education choice and the donors who support it. You have all allowed me to attend what I believe has been the best school for me and has helped shaped me into the person I am today."

Valedictorian Ryan Sleboda, a Gardiner scholar who was non-verbal until age 7, did not let his autism define him.

Ryan shared, "As the class of 2020, let us be a symbol that hard work, dedication and perseverance show that we can overcome adversity."

Step Up For Students advisory board members who represented Raymond James Financial, HCA, fiCFO, SAP America, Beall's, Inc. and Walgreens Co., along with Florida Senator Manny Diaz and Florida Representative Susan Valdés, extended their congratulations and well wishes to the Class of 2020.

To close the celebration, Step Up for Students Founder and Chairman John Kirtley offered inspiring words of encouragement for the senior class. "In trying times there are new pathways for opportunity and fulfillment that open up," he said, providing the seniors a reminder that, though times may be difficult now, their futures remain bright. "Life will send you in directions that you will never see coming and that's not a bad thing."

**WATCH THE STEP UP FOR
STUDENTS VIRTUAL SENIOR
CELEBRATION**
[HTTPS://YOUTU.BE/Q9LLWZUAVCW](https://youtu.be/Q9LLWZUAVCW)



Flexing muscle and keeping fit the virtual way.

It's 9 a.m. on a Tuesday in April.

Larissa Maloney, standing on a mat in the corner of her garage, presses the record button on her phone and what might be the largest physical education class in Florida is under way.

Maloney leads her virtual students that sometimes number in the thousands through a 30-minute workout. Depending on the day, the class includes heel touches, kick boxing, basketball jump shots, volleyball overhand smashes and digs, and yes, even swimming.

Maloney is physical education teacher at Father Lopez Catholic High School in Daytona Beach, Florida. Many of the students attend the private school on a Florida Tax Credit Scholarship managed by Step Up For Students. She began the virtual class in late March after schools in Florida were closed because of COVID-19.

Maloney named the class Active Kids 2.0 and started a YouTube channel so

her students could participate. As the months passed, her subscribers grew to more than 50,000, gaining followers from around the world.

"It's just blown up," Maloney said. "I just thought originally it was going to be for my students, then I had a friend ask if her students could do it too. I said, 'Of course. Why not?'"

The success of the virtual gym class does not surprise Father Lopez Principal Leigh Svajko. Maloney changes the workouts daily to keep them fresh and goes through the workouts herself, keeping the class as close to real for her students as can be expected during the pandemic.

"I think her willingness to get out there to be live every day, especially with our students that she interacts with, just shows her level of investment to them," Svajko said. "It's how plugged in she is to it."

Like every teacher in the state, Maloney needed a way to continue teaching her 75 students. But how do you teach PE without the use of a gym or athletic fields? She began by writing daily lesson plans – run a mile on Monday, push-ups and sit-ups on Tuesday, arms

and abdominal exercises on Wednesday and so on. Her plan was to send them to her students each day and have them reply with what they did and how long it took to complete.

"After I wrote that, I said, 'How boring.' I'm boring myself just sitting here reading it," Maloney said. "I have 14- through 18-year-olds. That's not going to cut it. I said, 'You know what? They're used to seeing me every day, so let's press record and do it like they're used to seeing me do it in class.'"

Once she realized the popularity of Active Kids 2.0, Maloney said she would continue the virtual PE class even when schools reopened. She has added karate, dance, cheer, gymnastics, toddler time fitness, boxing and yoga classes. The classes are covered by the Gardiner Scholarship for students with special needs.

"I've gotten so much – and it's weird to say this – but fan mail, and I've gotten so many families on board and so much love from the videos that people have committed to doing them every day, so I will keep doing them until I don't have any viewers," Maloney said. "I'll do them as long as I can." ♦



In the midst of the pandemic, her students made an audacious plea for audio books. An international company delivered.

As the pandemic bore down on Brian Lab Tutoring in Palm Bay, Sheryl Bo began to worry about how children were going to get access to free books as schools and libraries began closing.

"What are these kids going to do?" she asked herself. "Where are they going to get books? How are they going to keep their reading skills up?"

SHE HAD AN IDEA.
Let her students take charge.

"I'm teaching the persuasive essay with the punch at the end," she said. "We need a call to action at the end. Will you step up? Will you be a positive influence in this crisis?"

Bo challenged nine of her students to write an essay. The students, in grades three through six, included her son Ethan, a fourth grader. All of them were on the autism spectrum and benefited from a Gardiner Scholarship through Step Up For Students.

The target was Audible.com, an Amazon company that

offers audio books for a fee. Her students brainstormed and wrote the essay on March 13, the first day schools were closed.

The essay began: "Did you know that students with disabilities, like us, need audiobooks for most subjects? It's true. We are a group of high-functioning autistic students in Florida. We have a private tutor that helps us learn. A lot of us learn best when we can hear the book read aloud because some of us have dyslexia as well."

It concluded with, "Students like us need Audible to help us learn. ... Students who miss reading for weeks at a time will lose out on learning."

They emailed the essay immediately to Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos and Audible founder Don Katz. They

asked that Audible books be made available in some fashion for schoolchildren with special needs during the pandemic.

"I honestly didn't think I would get a reply," Bo said. "We were just doing it as a cool assignment."

Three days later, Bo received an email from Maureen Muenster, Katz's assistant.

"Happy to help!" she wrote.

Bo was thrilled.

The next day Muenster emailed Bo a link that surprised her. Audible had created a new free streaming website, stories.audible.com, with downloadable children's books and literary classics.

"It's definitely the coolest thing I have ever done, honestly," says Bo. "Audible really stepped up. This was definitely way more than I asked for."

WITH ALL THE CHAOS, WE FELT WE MADE A DIFFERENCE."



HELPING STUDENTS & FINDING PARTNERS.

After nine years of partnering with schools to enhance educational offerings, Step Up's Office of Student Learning has been renamed to

STUDENT LEARNING AND PARTNER SUCCESS

reflecting the department's shift in focus. When the department was launched 2011, its partnership was first with scholars' parents and guardians, then moved into schools fostering the partnership between educators, children, families with Step Up helping bridge gaps through the Success Partners Workshop. Later, it morphed into providing school-based professional development and working to ensure students were being taught at their personal level by using Measures of Academic Progress (MAP Growth™) testing as a tool. Now, Student Learning and Partner Success exists to engage, equip, and empower educational partners to support student success. Student Learning offers timely updates through its Bulletin Board webpage and develops connections to available high-quality resources and networking opportunities. The team hosts Step Up's annual Rising Stars events to honor and recognize exceptional students, teachers, and family members and our annual Choice in Education Conference, an educator's conference with breakout sessions related to education choice and teaching and learning. The department's staff builds a support base of school stakeholders, educates them about scholarships, and trains them to participate in advocacy so that they can be activated when needed. Student Learning and Partner Success is committed to supporting and building relationships with our educational partners (both parents and schools).

FLORIDA TAX CREDIT
SCHOLARSHIP (FTC)
STUDENT

PAGE 12 —

Finn Wheeler



EIGHTH GRADER,
FORT MYERS
CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

He is a fighter, a high achiever and an inspiration.

Finn Wheeler spent his fourth birthday in a drug-induced coma as doctors fought to stop the spread of the flesh-eating disease invading his body all while waging war against the recently discovered cancer attacking his bone marrow.

It was a delicate dance since the treatment of one could adversely impact the treatment of the other.

“They didn’t know what to do, because it was so weird,” Finn’s mom, Shawn, said. “I’ll be honest, most of the doctors did not think he would live.”

What doctors didn’t know at the time but would soon learn was that William Phinehas Wheeler, known to his family and friends as Finn, is a fighter. And he fought. Hard.

It took several surgeries on Finn’s upper back to rid his body of the necrotizing fasciitis, then three years of chemotherapy for Finn to beat acute lymphocytic leukemia. Now 13 and an eighth grader at Fort Myers Christian School, Finn has been cancer-free for more than five years.

Talk to teachers and administrators at Fort Myers Christian, the school Finn's family chose with the help of a Florida Tax Credit Scholarship managed by Step Up For Students, and they describe him using words like "persevere" and "persistent" and "extraordinarily amazing."

When asked what those words mean to him, Finn said, "That you have to fight hard for what you want to live for. I want to live for God and his plan for my life."

The Wheelers are a deeply Christian family. Shawn and her husband Chris, a pastor and the director of the Florida School of Discipleship in Fort Myers, wanted their four children to receive a religious-based education. They couldn't have done that without the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship. In addition to Finn, Benaiah, 11, is in the sixth grade and Kaden, 9, is in the fourth grade. Their sister, Arden, 15, is a Fort Myers Christian School graduate and now a sophomore at South Florida Christian Academy.

"If it weren't for Step Up, we wouldn't be able to send our kids to private school," Shawn said. "It just wouldn't happen."

This is especially important in Finn's case, where the smaller class sizes enable him to receive more one-on-one attention from teachers. His victory over cancer came with a price, though. A lingering effect of some of his medications makes it difficult for Finn to process information. He understands questions and knows the answers, but he sometimes has trouble connecting the two sides. Finn often takes tests in the school's learning resource center, where the questions are read to him.

"He can process that way," Shawn said, noting her son receives A's and B's in his classes.

Last year, Finn received the school's seventh-grade Christian Character Award.

"IF WE WERE ALLOWED TO CLONE STUDENTS, THEN HE WOULD BE ONE OF THE STUDENTS WE WOULD WANT MORE OF,"

said Fort Myers Christian Principal Mel Mitchell.

Jo Weber, who teaches kindergarten, has known Finn since he first arrived at the school as a cancer patient. She said Finn wasn't shy about telling his classmates about his cancer, what it was doing to him and how he was fighting back.

"He taught the kids so much," she said. "He was like an inspiration. He taught them compassion. He taught them understanding. He taught them not to fear." ♦



FINANCIALS

Who We Serve

FLORIDA TAX CREDIT

Income-based scholarship

108,441 students

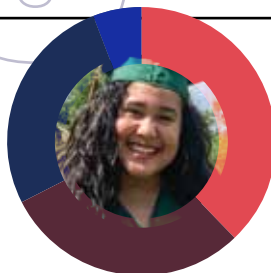
1,870 participating schools

53 percent of students from single-parent households

Average household income of **\$28,706** or just **10.1 percent** above the poverty level

Average household is **3.6** family members

Average scholarship amounts awarded **\$6,867** for grades K-5, **\$6,732** for grades 6-8 and **\$6,927** for grades 9-12



37.9 percent Hispanic

29.6 percent Black

26.7 percent white

5.8% other
(Asian, Native American, multi-racial and race not reported)

2.1 percent
Down-syndrome

2.5 percent
cerebral palsy

3.1 percent
with multiple
diagnoses

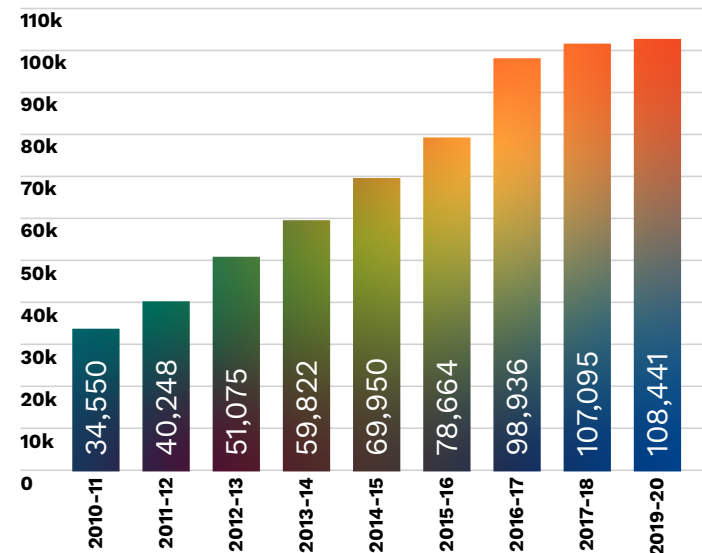
5.2 percent are
"high-risk"

10.4 percent
intellectual
disability

61.8 percent
diagnosed
with autism

14.9 percent
"Other"

FTC ENROLLMENT GROWTH



THREE MORE SCHOLARSHIPS

The state created the Family Empowerment Scholarship in 2019-20, funded directly by tax dollars and serving K-12 students from economically disadvantaged households similar to those on the Tax Credit Scholarship. The program was administered by the Florida Department of Education through a partnership with Step Up For Students. In total, Step Up For Students processed applications and determined eligibility for more than 17,000 schoolchildren to use the new option.

The Hope Scholarship program for children who were bullied in public schools entered its second year in 2019-20, and it served 445 students with private school scholarships totaling \$2.2 million.

The Reading Scholarship Accounts program, also in its second year, served public school students in grades 3-5 who were struggling with their reading. Each student is eligible for a \$500 scholarship that can be spent on tutoring or books or any educational tool to promote reading. The program served 6,792 students for a total of \$3.4 million.

GARDINER SCHOLARSHIP

Special or unique needs scholarship

13,463 students funded

\$139.9 million in scholarships

Average scholarship amount funded: **\$10,389** per student



Test Results Are In

For 12 consecutive years, low-income students on the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship experienced the same annual learning gains as all students nationwide.

“The typical FTC student tended to maintain his or her relative position in comparison with other students nationally both in math and reading,” wrote the researchers from the Learning Systems Institute at Florida State University. “It is important to note that these national comparisons pertain to all students nationally, and not just students from low-income families.”

Researchers reviewed testing data of more than 60,000 students in grades three through 10 attending one of 1,524 private schools required to test students.

The average student on the program scored the 47.4th percentile in reading and 45.4th percentile in math, and on average maintained his or her percentile rank from one year to the next when compared to a wealthier and whiter national average.

The Urban Institute, a Washington D.C. think tank, also updated its study of the

scholarship’s long-term impact on student achievement, finding that scholarship students were **up to 43% more likely to attend a four-year college and up to 20% more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree.**

The longer students remained on the scholarship the bigger their long-term gains too. The Urban Institute found that students who remained on scholarship for four or more years were up to 99% more likely to attend a four-year college and up to 45% more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree.

Test results and long-term gains are all the more impressive when you remember that the FTC program served the most disadvantaged students in the state.

Of the students on the Tax Credit Scholarship, 74% are non-white. The average household income was just \$28,706 per year (just 10% above the poverty level), while 53% of students lived in single-parent households.

State lawmakers boost scholarships in 2020 session.

The 2020 Legislative session wrapped up with a \$42 million increase for the Gardiner Scholarship program for students with unique abilities and a \$7.6 million appropriation for the Reading Scholarship. The legislature also increased enrollment growth for the Family Empowerment Scholarship from about 7,000 students a year to about 29,000, while also allowing the eligible household income to climb by 25 percentage points in any year in which 5 percent or more of scholarships are left unclaimed. Additionally, lawmakers decided that Tax Credit Scholarship students don’t have to submit their household income after the first year to ensure learning continuity. The legislature also allowed a rollover of unused Hope Scholarship dollars to fund FTC scholarships, where 1 in 10 students surveyed have reported missing school in the past to avoid bullying.

Gardiner Scholarship Expanded by \$42 Million

TALLAHASSEE, FLORIDA

Months after a rally organized by Step Up For Students to support the Gardiner Scholarship, Gov. Ron DeSantis made good on a promise to expand the program for children with certain special needs and signed the state budget on June 29, 2020, boosting the program's allocation by \$42 million to a total of \$189.9 million.

At the time of the budgetary increase, the scholarship was serving more than 13,000 students, but about 3,500 had been waiting for additional funding.

Gardiner differs from other state scholarships in that it allows parents to personalize their child's education by directing money toward a combination of programs and approved providers. Approved expenses include tuition, therapy, curriculum, technology and a college savings account. Unspent money can roll over from year to year.

Gardiner Scholarship amounts vary according to grade, county and severity of need. The average amount for most students in the 2019-20 school year was \$10,400.

On Jan. 22, 2020, Gov. Ron DeSantis welcomed about 600 rally attendees, including families, educators, education choice advocates and lawmakers, calling the Gardiner Scholarship "a lifeline for a lot of families in Florida."

"We're going to work on the wait list this year," he said. "We really believe all parents need to find the best school for their child."

Marsy Miller's son, Ian, struggled for years to keep up with his classmates. Mainstreamed at his district school, Ian, who is on the

autism spectrum, needed behavioral therapy, one-on-one attention, tutoring, and a smaller classroom environment.

Miller was ready to give up on Ian's school by the time he reached fourth grade. But she never gave up on Ian.

Fortunately, neither did Florida lawmakers, who in 2014 approved the Gardiner Scholarship program to help Ian and other students with unique abilities.

"It opened up a world of opportunities for Ian," said Miller, who was among hundreds who attended a rally at Waller Park near the Capitol to thank lawmakers for creating the scholarship and to ask for an expansion to help more students.

"The scholarship has changed Ian's life," Miller said, explaining that it enabled him to attend a private school that was better able to meet his needs and receive therapy that helped him become more independent.

Senate President Bill Galvano assured rally attendees that the scholarship's future was secure.

“We will always support the Gardiner Scholarship,” he said.

State Rep. James Bush III, D-District 109, one of six Democrats who voted in favor last year of the Family Empowerment Scholarship program, promised to remain a champion of education choice.

“I BELIEVE THAT ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL,” HE SAID. “IF CHILDREN ARE GOING TO BE SUCCESSFUL, WE NEED TO EMPOWER PARENTS. IF WE ARE GOING TO SAVE THE NEXT GENERATION, PARENTS MUST BE INCLUDED.”

He added: “You have a friend here in the House. I stand forever with our children.”

Created in 2014, the Gardiner scholarship serves more than 13,000 students with certain special needs, including autism, Down syndrome and spina bifida. ♦

Five-year-old Madison Walker's message to rally attendees: Opportunity gives me love, peace, connection. Madison attends Ridge Manor Christian Academy.



Students from Ridge Manor Christian Academy in Hernando County play games while waiting in the civic center ahead of the Gardiner rally. The school brought 96 students to petition for Gardiner Scholarship expansion.

A wheelchair is no obstacle to his success.

The muscular dystrophy had progressed, and now Ethan Hatch needed a wheelchair full time. This did not upset Ethan as much as it did his family and friends. It was inevitable, and his quality of life improved in that he no longer risked falling while walking.

But there was this: Ethan was entering seventh grade, which meant his classes at Morning Star School were held in the front wing in classrooms that are not wheelchair accessible. They had stairs and no other options.

A problem? It could have been, but Principal Eileen Odom and her staff had a solution: Move the junior high classes to the back wing, where there are no stairs, and the elementary classes from the back wing to the front. Easier said than done, but with the help of a small army of volunteers – including Ethan's parents, Lisa and Carter – the switch was made during the summer of 2019.

"That was very nice that they did that for him," Lisa said.

"Anything for Ethan," Odom said.

Ethan, 15, attends the private first- through eighth-grade Catholic school for special needs students in Tampa on a Gardiner Scholarship managed by Step Up For Students. The Hatches, who live nearby in Carrollwood, use the scholarship to cover the cost of Morning Star's tuition. That allows them to send their other two children to Catholic schools.

"We feel so lucky to get it," Lisa said. "It helps out a lot."

Ethan, now an eighth grader, has attended Morning Star for four years. Prior to that, he attended a district school, where he found it difficult to keep up academically. His muscular dystrophy has caused some learning delays, especially in reading and writing. He found it hard making friends.

Ethan's parents were thrilled when they learned about the Gardiner Scholarship. It enabled Ethan to receive a Catholic education, like his brother and sister, while attending a school suited for his needs.

"HE GETS SUCH INDIVIDUALIZED TREATMENT AND FOCUS. After the first year there, he was like a different child," Lisa said.

To Lisa, Ethan and Morning Star are a perfect fit.

"I like that I have made so many friends and that the teachers are so nice," Ethan said. "It was hard to make friends at my last school, and I made friends the first day at Morning Star."

Ethan won an award for perseverance during his first year at the school. Last year, he received the Chris Fredo Scholarship of Excellence Award for being an "exemplary student" for his "quiet, cheerful demeanor and positive outlook."

"One thing that hit me is not once has he ever complained about his physical limitations," one teacher wrote.

When asked about needing a wheelchair, Ethan said, "It was a little bit hard at first having to use a wheelchair because I would rather walk, but I knew I had to use it because I would fall at times and get hurt. ... I felt safer in the wheelchair."

EIGHTH GRADER,
MORNING STAR
CATHOLIC SCHOOL

Ethan was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy, a disease that cause progressive weakness and loss of muscle mass, when he was 3. He had delays in learning to roll over, to sit up and to walk. He drooled often. He was 13 when he began using a wheelchair.

News that your young child has muscular dystrophy is hard on every parent. But Lisa calls Ethan a “joy and a blessing” in their lives.

“Although it is not easy at times, we wouldn’t want him any other way,” she said. “Having this disease has made him who he is, and he is the best.”

Lisa said Ethan feels like “a normal kid” at Morning Star.

“That’s the best thing about it,” she said.

They found a role for him during the Christmas play where he could act his part without going on stage. Physical education teacher Lauren Smutko includes Ethan in all the activities. She even pushes him around the field during flag football. With the help of his friends, who helped him maneuver his wheelchair, Ethan was a hit last year during a line dancing competition.

“Ethan is such a great kid,” Lisa said “He really rolls with the punches and is always happy. He has a great sense of humor. Nothing really seems to get him down, unless we tell him no chicken wings for dinner.” ♦

Ethan Hatch



DOLLARS TO SCHOLARS

Step Up For Students offers a variety of educational choice opportunities to students that are made possible by donors who support the organization

in a variety of ways. Donor contributions range from tax-credited, direct scholarship support to philanthropic organizational support that funds innovative programs aimed to enhance the scholarship programs.

Tax Credit Opportunities:



Alcoholic
Beverage
Excise Tax
UP TO 90%



Business Rent/
Commercial
Lease Tax
UP TO 100%



Corporate
Income Tax
UP TO 100%



Direct Pay
Sales and
Use Tax
UP TO 100%



Insurance
Premium Tax
UP TO 100%



Oil and/or Gas
Production Tax
UP TO 50%

Florida Tax Credit Scholarship

Step Up's largest area of financial support comes from companies that make tax-credited contributions through the Florida Tax Credit (FTC) Scholarship Program. The funds provide education scholarships for lower-income children in grades kindergarten through 12.

The impact of this program has been well-researched. Eleven years of annual learning gains research commissioned by the state of Florida, as well as a longitudinal study by the Urban Institute, a Washington D.C.-based not-for-profit economic and policy and research organization, show that the impact of the FTC Scholarship is immediately evident and in the long-term for the students served by it.

Moreover, eight independent fiscal analyses have concluded the state

benefits financially when corporations make tax-credited contributions.

Companies that give to Step Up are investing in expanding opportunities for children across the state. By the 2019-20 schoolyear, Step Up had funded more than 891,000 K-12 scholarships through corporate contributions of over \$5.25 billion through this initiative. Six tax liabilities are eligible for the dollar-for-dollar tax credit. Any company with an eligible tax liability to Florida can participate, regardless of where the company is headquartered. Examiners at bank Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) regulatory agencies have approved dollars transferred to fund Florida Tax Credit Scholarships for positive consideration under the CRA investment test.



Hope Scholarship

Created in 2018, this dynamic program provides an alternative for bullied public school students so they can focus on academics at school rather than worry about their mental and physical well-being. Individuals buying or registering a newly purchased vehicle in Florida can contribute up to \$105 of the state sales tax to fund the Hope Scholarship Program. Automobile buyers can make the tax election at Florida's automobile dealerships, county tax collectors and private tag agencies.

The Hope Scholarship gives bullied public school students the option to attend another school that best fits their learning needs. Students can use the program to attend an out-of-district public school or a private school that's approved by the Florida Department of Education.

The Legislature expanded the Hope Scholarship Program in 2020 to allow unused Hope funds to rollover and fund Florida Tax Credit Scholarships beginning

July 1, 2020. Of the 73,117 Florida Tax Credit families who responded to a 2019-20 survey by Step Up, more than 7,600 FTC students – 1 in 10 – reported to have stayed away from their previous school at some point to avoid being bullied or harassed.

TO WATCH A VIDEO
ABOUT HOW THE HOPE
SCHOLARSHIP WORKS, VISIT
WWW.STEPUPPFORHOPE.ORG



**2019-20 TOTAL HOPE
CONTRIBUTIONS:**

\$66,808,090



**2019-2020 CAR BUYERS WHO
ELECTED TO FUND HOPE
SCHOLARSHIPS:**

636,267

Hope
by the
numbers:

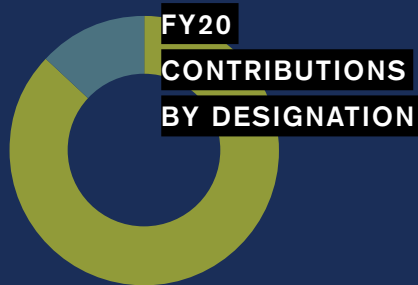


Philanthropy

Charitable contributions to Step Up help fund organizational innovation and scholarship delivery. Donors who are philanthropically supporting Step Up help maximize the impact of a scholarship by creating education-based innovations and helping enrich existing resources.

Step Up established the first-ever endowment fund during 2019-20. Seeded by a generous planned gift from a longtime Step Up supporter, the endowment is a part of our sustainable funding plan to ensure marginalized families can access to quality educational options for their children.

This past year also saw the conclusion of our three-year campaign to launch and fund MyScholarShop, an online marketplace. Through this platform, Gardiner Scholarship recipients purchase instructional materials without outlaying personal funds. The generous support from foundation and corporate grantors as well as individual donations totaled \$3,737,000 and gave the platform the capacity to accommodate 100% of Step Up's Gardiner scholars.



Total Raised in FY20
\$1,276,551

FY20 Unrestricted:
\$164,608 — 12.9%

FY20 Restricted:
\$1,111,943 — 87.1%

WAYS TO GIVE:

- **Personal Contributions**
- **Donor Advised Funds**
- **Workplace Giving Campaigns**
- **Employer Matching Gifts**
- **Vehicle Donations**
- **Planned Gifts**
- **Amazon Smile Contributions**

DONATE ONLINE AT
[SUF.S.ORG/DONATE](https://sufs.org/donate)

Jayven Washington

SIXTH GRADER,
GRACE CHRISTIAN
SCHOOL

He was bullied before he received love and Hope.

Jayven Washington was talking to one of his teachers not long after he began attending Grace Christian School as a sixth grader in the fall of 2019 when the teacher said, “Jayven, we love having you here.”

Jayven replied, “It’s nice to be loved.”

Bethany McKee-Alexander, principal of the pre-K-through-8 private school in Ocala, is quick to tell that story when talking about Jayven.

“We’ve fallen in love with him,” she said. “He’s a sweet addition to our school.”

The anecdote sums up Jayven’s experience during his first year at Grace Christian and illustrates the goal of the Hope Scholarship, which Jayven receives.

Managed by Step Up For Students, the Hope Scholarship allows parents of children who are bullied in district schools to find new learning environments at another district school or at a participating private school – away from the bully.

Stacey Allen used the scholarship to move her son Jayven, 12, from a district school, where he was repeatedly bullied as a fifth grader, to Grace Christian.

“It was my best decision ever,” Allen said.

Now a sixth grader, Jayven is an easy-going, likeable student who works hard in the classroom and earns solid grades, according to McKee-Alexander. “What we witnessed at our school is someone who has a very gentle spirit. He has a very kind of heart,” McKee-Alexander said.

But it’s that gentle spirit that made Jayven an inviting target to a small pack of classmates at his former school.

“I told the dean, and they got suspended a couple of days, but when they came back, they did the same thing,” Jayven said.

“It was very serious,” Allen said. “I was constantly at the school, constantly getting calls from the school. It would stop and then it would be worse the next time around. He didn’t want to go to school at all. It was terrible.”

Allen said school officials told her about the Hope Scholarship, a notification that is outlined in the law and obligates districts to notify the parents about the availability of the scholarship. She applied and was accepted. Allen said Grace Christian was the only school in the area that accepted the scholarship. Fortunately, the school is a short ride from their Ocala home.

McKee-Alexander remembers her first meeting with Jayven when he and his mom toured the school. Jayven shook her hand and answered questions with “Yes, ma’am” and “No, ma’am.” He told McKee-Alexander about what happened at his previous school. Jayven’s grades weren’t very good, but McKee-Alexander figured that was from the bullying, because he tested well.

“He was nervous about entering a new school but also excited and hopeful,” McKee-Alexander said. “I think there was some hope. I can only imagine there was some skepticism and not being sure that switching schools would be the answer. But I think once he did arrive and start the process, that trying something new paid off.”

Jayven said he loves everything about Grace Christian. He made three friends on his very first day. He likes the teachers. He finds the schoolwork challenging and exciting. Most of all, he feels safe and welcomed.

“All my teachers tell me they love having me there,” he said. “I love being at Grace.” ♦





FISCAL Accountability 19/20

Step Up For Students experienced a decline in the contributions to the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship in 2020 primarily due to the timing of the payments from tax-credited contributions, some of which were delayed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the timing differences, calendar year pledges have remained consistent year-over-year.



Total Revenue for FY20:
\$620,945,241

Tax Credit Scholarship Contributions:
\$611,224,472 — 98.4%

Other: \$7,168,415 — 1.2%

Foundations and Other Philanthropic Donors:
\$2,552,354 — 0.4%



Total Expenses for FY20:
\$720,511,233

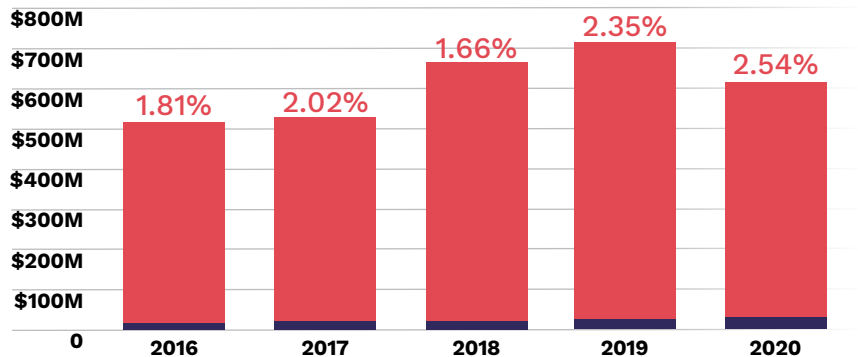
Tax Credit Scholarship Expenses:
\$690,887,917 — 96%

Other Scholarship Expenses:
\$21,404,559 — 2.9%

General & Administrative:
\$5,791,533 — 0.8%

Development & Fundraising:
\$2,427,224 — 0.3%

2020 NON-SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM RATES



% of NSPE/REV

Revenue

Non-scholarship Program Expenses

Non-scholarship expenses include program expenses and overhead expenses associated with administering the scholarship programs. These expenses are funded by program administrative allowances, grants, investment income and donations.



GARDINER
GRAD
SPOTLIGHT

Ryan Sleboda

GRADUATE OF
PACE BRANTLEY
SCHOOL

A Gardiner scholar proves he is ready for college.

Susan Sleboda can pinpoint the exact moment when she knew in her heart that her son Ryan could handle life away from home as a full-time college student.

It was the summer before his senior year in high school. Ryan, who has autism, spent three weeks living in a dorm room on the campus of Beacon College, participating in the school's Summer for Success program. Beacon is a four-year college in Leesburg, Florida designed for students who learn differently. The Summer of Success program offers high school students a small taste of college life, complete with classes and social interactions.

It was the first time Ryan spent an extended period away from his family, who lives about 50 miles east of Beacon's campus in Sanford. Whatever anxieties Susan and her husband, Bill, had about their youngest son's ability to live on his own and cope with college life were erased when Ryan bounded toward their car on the final day of the program.

"Honestly," Susan said, "I couldn't believe he was the same person. He entered that Summer of Success program as a young boy, and when we picked him up, he was a young man."

Ryan handled everything thrown his way during those three weeks. He proved he could be responsible on his own. He carried himself with a confidence his parents had not seen before.

continued on next page

“We were very nervous in what the future held for Ryan,” Susan said. “But Beacon College gave us a sense of calm because that program showed us that Ryan could actually do that. Ryan could go to college.”

Now 19, Ryan is a freshman at Beacon majoring in anthrozoology. He looks forward to a career working with animals.

Susan credits Ryan’s high school education at the Pace Brantley School in Longwood, which specializes in teaching students who require individual attention. Ryan attended the school with the help of a Gardiner Scholarship managed by Step Up For Students. He was challenged both academically and socially and graduated last June as the class valedictorian.

“The Gardiner Scholarship allowed us to financially support sending Ryan to a school like Pace Brantley,” Susan said. “The academic programs and social experiences at Pace Brantley created the perfect opportunity for Ryan to grow and learn. All those experiences enabled Ryan to go away to college, live on campus in a dorm room and show us that he could have a true college experience in a safe and supportive environment.”

Ryan wanted the same college experience living away at college that was enjoyed by his older brothers, Matthew (Florida Atlantic University) and Jason (Florida State University).

While other colleges in Florida offered similar majors, only Beacon offered anthrozoology. The college has a student enrollment of around 400 and class sizes averaging between 12 and 16, ideal for students like Ryan who learn differently. While other colleges offer support for students on the spectrum, an individualized support system for each student is part of Beacon’s fabric.

“Beacon actually meets the academic needs that I’ve been looking for,” Ryan said.

Beacon’s goal is for the students to graduate and not only find a job, but a career. That was always the goal Susan and Bill had for their youngest son. That’s always been Ryan’s goal, too.

“(It) will be extra hard,” Ryan said of college life, “but I like challenges, and I am excited to see what comes next.” ♦



2019-20 Honor Roll



Charity Navigator: ★★★★★

GuideStar: Platinum Seal of Transparency

18th on the Chronicle Philanthropy's list of
America's Favorite Charities

20th on Forbes' list of America's Top Charities

Step Up Boards 2019-20

Governance Board

Allison Hertog, Founding Attorney
of Making School Work

Terry Jove, Charitable Giving Director,
Southern Glazer's Wine & Spirits

John Kirtley, co-founder of KLH Capital

Alfred "Al" Lawson, U.S. Representative
for Florida's 5th Congressional District

John Legg, Former State Senator

Richard Outram, EVP and CFO,
Signature Consultants LLC

Paul Sherman, Chief Development Officer,
ABB OPTICAL GROUP

Curtis Stokes, President & Owner,
VR Business Sales



Advisory Board

Gary Andresen, U.S. Bank

Jeff Beauchamp, SAP

Benjamin Bright, HCA

Michele Cavallo, Duke Energy

Deb Cone, Cone Distributing

Peter Corrigan, Insurance Consultant

Joseph Hernandez, TIAA/EverBank

Kimberly Johnson, fiCFO

Brian Lukasik, PwC

Michael Maddaloni, Bealls Inc.

Jeff Sabin, Waste Management

Paul Shoukry, Raymond James Financial

Sally West, Walgreens Co.

Emeritus Advisory Board Members

Gordon Fales, Banking Consultant

Cole Peacock, Retail Consultant

Donor Events



SEPT. 30, 2019

The Depository & Trust Clearing Corporation

108 SCHOLARSHIPS FUNDED THIS YEAR

FAST FACT: Representatives from the Depository & Trust Clearing Corporation (DTCC) enjoyed meeting with a few Step Up scholars at Tampa Bay Christian Academy to hear about unique opportunities they have at the school and their goals for the future. DTCC partnered with Step Up For Students for the first time in 2019-20.



OCT. 10, 2019

Summit Bank and BancorpSouth Bank (NYSE: BXS)

28 SCHOLARSHIPS FUNDED THIS YEAR

WHY GIVE?: "We're always exploring ways to make an impact in our communities," said Frank Hall, BancorpSouth's Panama City Market President. "This contribution to Step Up For Students is a great way to show our commitment to the Florida Panhandle."

FAST FACT: Summit Bank and BancorpSouth celebrated their support of Step Up For Students by visiting with students who benefit from the program at three different schools in Northwest Florida: Lighthouse Private Christian Academy, Cinco Christian School, and St. John Catholic School. Since 2014, Summit Bank and BancorpSouth have generously funded 121 scholarships.



OCT. 21, 2019

Republic National Distributing Company (RNDC)

10,058 SCHOLARSHIPS FUNDED THIS YEAR

WHY GIVE?: “At Republic National Distributing Company, we are committed to making a positive difference that enriches the spirit and well-being of our associates, communities, and business partners,” said Ron Barcena, executive vice president of RNDC. “We know that our partnership with Step Up For Students is doing just that and we are proud to help provide thousands of Florida schoolchildren with the educational opportunities they deserve.”

FAST FACT: Republic National Distributing Company (RNDC) representatives celebrated their partnership with Step Up at Tampa Catholic High School and learned about the school’s Space Lab from students who benefit from the scholarship program. Since 2012, RNDC has generously funded 49,675 scholarships.



NOV. 5, 2019

Universal Property & Casualty Insurance Company (UPCIC)

359 SCHOLARSHIPS FUNDED THIS YEAR

WHY GIVE?: “Universal is committed to giving back and empowering the communities that it serves to accelerate community opportunities and build the foundation for the next generation of business leaders,” said Steve Donaghy, CEO for Universal.

FAST FACT: Universal Property & Casualty Insurance Company (UPCIC) celebrated its contribution at Saint Helen Catholic School where Dan Marino, UPCIC spokesperson, NFL hall of famer and former Miami Dolphins quarterback made a special appearance and spoke to the schoolchildren about the importance of education. Since 2017, UPCIC has generously funded 1,260 scholarships.



Donor Events



JAN. 10, 2020

Cal-Maine Foods, Inc.

15 SCHOLARSHIPS FUNDED THIS YEAR

WHY GIVE?: “At Cal-Maine Foods, it is very important for us to give back to our community,” said Dolph Baker, CEO of Cal-Maine Foods. “We are proud to partner with Step Up and we know that our support is making a difference in the lives of Florida schoolchildren.”

FAST FACT: Cal-Maine Foods Vice President of Operations Chris Myers presented the company’s donation to the scholarship program to Step Up For Students Development Officer Diana Allan. This is the first year that Cal-Maine Foods has partnered with Step Up.



JAN. 15, 2020

Bloomin’ Brands Test Kitchen, Tampa, FL Bloomin’ Brands, Inc.

58 SCHOLARSHIPS FUNDED THIS YEAR

WHY GIVE?: “We are committed to investing in our communities, our youth and our future,” said David Deno, CEO of Bloomin’ Brands. “We are proud to help create scholarship opportunities so that all students have a pathway to success.”

FAST FACT: Students enrolled in the Culinary Enrichment Program at Academy Prep Center of Tampa, who also benefit from the scholarship program, visited the Bloomin’ Brands Test Kitchen (Outback Steakhouse, Carrabba’s Italian Grill, Bonefish Grill, Fleming’s Prime Steakhouse & Wine Bar) for a meet and greet, kitchen tour, and food demonstrations with the chefs and executives from Bloomin’ Brands and Step Up. This is the first year that Bloomin’ Brands has partnered with Step Up For Students.

JAN. 23, 2020

Bank OZK

503 SCHOLARSHIPS FUNDED THIS YEAR



WHY GIVE?: “Bank OZK is committed to making a difference in our local communities, and one of the best ways to do that is through education,” said Alan Randolph, Bank OZK’s regional director of community banking for Florida and New York. “No matter where a person may start, a solid education opens doors to career opportunities and success. We are proud of the difference we are making across Florida with our partnership with Step Up For Students.”

FAST FACT: Bank OZK representatives celebrated their support with a check presentation and photos with Step Up For Students staff and Cristo Rey High School students who are benefiting from the scholarship. Since 2017, Bank OZK has funded 885 scholarships.

JAN. 24, 2020

Breakthru Beverage Florida

5,028 SCHOLARSHIPS FUNDED THIS YEAR

WHY GIVE?: “At Breakthru Beverage, we’re committed to making a positive difference in the communities we serve,” said Eric Roth, chief financial officer of Breakthru Beverage Florida. “One of the important ways we achieve that goal is by partnering with many of North America’s leading charitable organizations, including Step Up For Students. We are proud to partner with Step Up in their mission to help give Florida schoolchildren the educational opportunities they deserve.”

FAST FACT: Representatives from Breakthru Beverage Florida visited Abundant Life Christian Academy where students benefiting from the scholarship program shared their science fair projects that were up for judging. Since 2011, Breakthru Beverage Florida has generously funded 55,882 Florida Tax Credit scholarships.





Gabriella Bueno

SENIOR,
BOCA RATON
CHRISTIAN
SCHOOL

From speaking no English to graduating in the top of her class.

For years, Gabriella Bueno dreamed of attending the University of Central Florida, and as her senior year at Boca Raton Christian School got underway, it was time to take the next step in making that goal a reality. She applied and hoped her hard work – and faith – would take her there.

“I was accepted to my dream school, the University of Central Florida, and I was recognized as a Top 10 Knight there which recognizes students who were ranked in the Top 10% of their high school class,” she said.

But it was a dream that came with challenges.

“I struggled with test anxiety for a while, which was challenging to say the least,” said Gabriella, who goes by Gabby. “But when you have a good support system like the teachers at my school, my parents, and my faith in God they have all helped me overcome this hurdle in my life.”

**SHE WAS DETERMINED
TO SOAR ACADEMICALLY
FROM AN EARLY AGE.**

Ginny Braga, Boca Raton Christian's K-3 early supervisor, was Gabby's first teacher back in pre-K and saw that drive early on.

"I was Gabby's 4-year-old teacher and when she came to school, she knew no English. It was kind of like her first time out in the world really," she said, recalling the shy girl who spoke Spanish at home and at church. "The thing about Gabby is, as she learned more English you realized she was a brilliant student, a brilliant, brilliant student."

By the end of that first year in pre-K, Gabby was fluent in English. From then on, Braga enjoyed watching her former student grow. "She was just willing to always take on things and be a leader. And she's quite a great leader," Braga said.

Gabby's work ethic and dreams were first fueled by her parents' idea of the ideal education for their children. They wanted to send Gabby and her two siblings to a private school with Christian foundations, but quickly learned they could not afford it beyond pre-K. Her mom started working at Boca Christian and got a discount. Dad has always worked two jobs in the restaurant business. Still, financially it was a struggle until they learned about the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship through Step Up For Students.

"Then they were blessed with the knowledge that they could pursue their choice of education for their children – all three of us – through the financial assistance and support of Step Up," said Gabby about her parents. "Through the benefit of Step Up, I was able to attend my elementary, middle school, and high school years at Boca Christian."

Her mother is also grateful for Step Up's scholarship program and said it was a life-changing experience for her daughter.

"My Gabby is more on the quiet side," said Gabby's mother, Osmilda. "I just feel going to a big school would have been

overwhelming for Gabby. ... I feel like she would have gotten lost in the crowd."

Instead, with the help of her scholarship, she flourished. She was the Student Council Secretary, the girls' varsity basketball captain, and the National Honor Society president. She was also involved in various other clubs at Boca Christian. She was recognized as a Gold Honor Roll student all four years of high school. With all of her extracurricular activities, Gabby managed to maintain a high GPA, graduating with a 4.1. As with most high school graduates in the Class of 2020 nationwide, she had a virtual graduation. But that wasn't the only thing unexpected. In addition to the University of Central Florida, the acceptance letters kept coming in from Florida Atlantic University, Samford, Liberty, Southeastern, Georgia State, and Florida Gulf Coast University. It got Gabby thinking.

"After careful consideration, I decided to attend Florida Atlantic University (FAU) to pursue a pharmaceutical career. Sometimes your dreams shift so you can achieve even more," she said of her college selection that was influenced by the uncertainty of the pandemic and desire to be close to home. "I am so excited to begin this new journey in life. I couldn't have done it without the support of my parents, the support of my teachers at Boca Christian, and the support of Step Up For Students with its income-based scholarship." ♦



Laura Negroni

With a little help, she now devours her books.

Laura Negroni was raised on books. It was only natural to raise her children on books, too. It feeds their souls.

Negroni's mom read to her when she was a little girl. Negroni, in turn, reads to her two daughters, including Natalia, who is 10.

"Since they were babies, we gave them books," Negroni said. "I read to them when they were little. They always asked, 'Mom, can you read me a book?'"

Natalia loves going to the library. You will often find her there when she has some free time at Poinciana Academy of Fine Arts in Kissimmee, Florida, where she is in the fifth grade.

"That's her hobby," Negroni said.

So, you can understand Negroni's concern when in the third grade Natalia received a low score in reading on the Florida Standards Assessments, the state's tool to measure student performance.

FIFTH GRADER,
POINCIANA ACADEMY
OF FINE ARTS



Negroni received a letter from her daughter's public school informing her about the Reading Scholarship Accounts, managed by Step Up For Students.

Established in 2018 by the Florida Legislature, the scholarship helps public school students in third through fifth grade who struggle with reading. The program offers parents access to Education Savings Accounts, worth \$500 each, to pay for tuition and fees for approved part-time tutoring, summer and after-school literacy programs, instructional materials, technology and curriculum related to reading or literacy. Students who scored a 1 or 2 on the third or fourth grade English Language Arts section of the Florida Standards Assessments in the prior year are eligible.

Negroni opted for a tablet that she used to read books and play educational games, like ABCya!, which is designed for students pre-K through sixth grade. Natalia was able to work on her reading, math and typing skills.

It worked. She was enrolled in two reading classes in the fourth grade and only one in the fifth.

"When I was in the second grade, I used to have trouble concentrating," Natalia said.

While she read everything she could, she didn't always comprehend what she was reading.

"She's a little hyperactive," Negroni said.

ABCya!, helped improve Natalia's focus, allowing her to better absorb what she is reading.

"That's important," Negroni said.

Natalia recently received a "Star Student" award from school for being a "hard worker and active listener." Her grades have improved in all her subjects, including math. She used to struggle in that subject, but thanks to ABCya!, she was able to improve her math skills as well.

Natalia has an uncle who is an artist. She developed an interest in art after he taught her how to paint. That's why Natalia attends Poinciana Academy of Fine Arts, an arts-integrated magnet school in the Osceola County School District. In addition to art classes, she also studies music and drama.

BUT NATALIA'S FIRST LOVE IS READING.

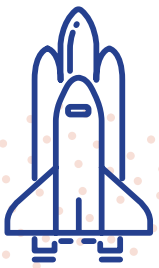
"Mysteries, gothic novels," she said.

Natalia is reading her way through the Dork Diary series. She devoured E.B. White's classic "Charlotte's Web". Up next: "Harry Potter."

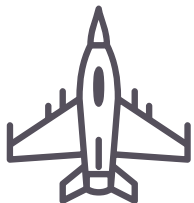
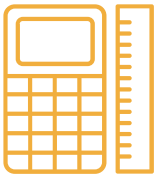
Students in Natalia's class take a test whenever they finish a book. Anyone who scores an 80 or above receives a token. Natalia has more than 15 tokens.

"Your intelligence comes from reading," Negroni said. "You're going to learn more and more." ♦





Rising to
Meet the
Challenge



1901 ULMERTON ROAD #180
CLEARWATER, FL 33762

4655 SALISBURY ROAD #400
JACKSONVILLE, FL 32256

(877) 735-7837

www.StepUpForStudents.org