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## IMPORTANT UPDATES ON SCHOOL CHOICE IN FLORIDA

# Student Spotlight



**Denisha Merriweather**  
Esprit de Corps  
Center for Learning  
Jacksonville, FL

Denisha Merriweather is an 11th grader at Esprit de Corps Center for Learning in Jacksonville, a school she has attended for the past five years on the Step Up For Students Scholarship Program. Denisha is an honor roll student with big plans for the future. However, Denisha had to overcome many personal and academic struggles to get where she is today.

For the first part of her life, Denisha resided with her biological mother, and they often moved from place to place. As a result, Denisha never stayed in one school for very long. The constant need for Denisha to re-adjust to new school environments took a tremendous toll on her academic performance. By the time she was in third grade, she was failing all of her classes. To make matters worse, Denisha often got picked on by other students because of her low grades. Frustrated with her failing grades and the constant conflicts with her peers, Denisha would lash out, often getting into physical fights with other students. Her failing grades combined with the many days she was absent from school caused her to fail the third grade twice.

In fourth grade, Denisha switched to another public school and enrolled in a special program designed to help students who have fallen behind catch up to their grade level. Despite the ef-

forts from Denisha and her teachers, Denisha barely caught up to her grade level by the end of the year. Her self-esteem was crushed.

In the fifth grade, Denisha transferred to yet another public school. The teachers at this new school worked hard to help her overcome her learning difficulties and she started to make some progress. However, her conflicts with other students continued and she began to get into physical fights with her peers once again. Because of her dwindling self-esteem, she found it hard to apply herself.

In sixth grade, Denisha's life took a positive turn. Now in the care of her Godmother, Johnell Jones, Denisha began attending Esprit de Corps on a Step Up For Students Scholarship. With the much-needed one-on-one attention from her teachers, Denisha was able to finally break her learning barriers. By the end of the first nine weeks, her grades had risen from D's and F's to A's and B's. She also learned valuable lessons in respect, and with the mutual consideration and encouragement from the other students around her, she no longer had the need to defend herself by fighting.

By the end of the first semester at Esprit de Corps, she made the A/B honor roll. Since that time, her progress has continued and she has consistently made the honor roll. Her experience

at Esprit de Corps has also inspired her to help other children overcome their own difficulties. She is an active volunteer at the Jacksonville-area Police Athletic League, where she enjoys helping children that may be dealing some of the same challenges she has faced. She is also the Statewide Vice President of the Youth Directors Council in Florida, a leadership program that is an extension of the Police Athletic League.

Now in the 11th grade, Denisha maintains a 3.8 GPA and is preparing for the future. After studying genetics last year in her biology class, she has decided to pursue a career as a geneticist. After graduation, she plans on attending Florida Community College at Jacksonville (FCCJ) for the first two years and then transferring to Ohio State University to complete her degree.

### About Esprit de Corps Center for Learning

Located in Jacksonville, Fla., Esprit de Corps Center for Learning currently serves 127 students in Kindergarten through 12th grade. More than 70 students at the school are receiving Step Up For Students Scholarships. The cost of tuition at Esprit de Corps is \$4,260. The school annually administers the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT).



# NEWSLETTER



## Gov. Crist Celebrates Corporate Contributions for Your Child's Scholarship

Denisha Merriweather is but one of the 22,500 students who are receiving K-12 scholarships in Florida this year, but that makes her story no less compelling. The progress she has made as a junior at Esprit de Corps Center for Learning in Jacksonville left even Gov. Charlie Crist amazed at a rally Nov. 10 to celebrate the seventh year of Step Up For Students Scholarships.

"Denisha is a young woman who has found a new spark in her life," Crist said. "She has turned around her school career because she found a school that connected with her. God bless her."

Denisha has received a Step Up For Students Scholarship for five years, and she stood before the governor, local dignitaries, corporate donors and more than 600 parental choice supporters at The Potter's House Christian Academy in Jacksonville to tell her story.

Denisha told those in attendance that, before

receiving the scholarship, she failed third grade twice, missed school repeatedly, recorded D's and F's in her classes, and found herself in conflicts and physical fights with other students. Now, she is an honor roll student with a 3.8 GPA who is an active volunteer for the Police Athletic League and the statewide vice president of the Youth Directors Council in Florida. She is looking toward college and a career as a geneticist.

"The last five years have completely changed my life," Denisha said. "If it weren't for the scholarship program, I might have been one more student who drops out of school and just another statistic. ... My school ended up being a perfect fit for me. It was the first time in my life that I actually believed in myself."

Gov. Crist was joined in his praise by retired Duval Sheriff Nathaniel Glover Jr. and former State Rep. Terry Fields. Sheriff Glover, a police

*story continued on page 2*



**Gov. Crist greets scholarship student Denisha Merriweather and Step Up For Students Chairman John Kirtley.**

## Step Up For Students Receiving Widespread, Bipartisan Support

As the number of Step Up For Students Scholarships in Florida continues to grow, so too does the program's reputation. Now in its seventh year, Step Up For Students is enjoying some of its broadest civic and political support yet.

"We work hard to make sure that policymakers understand what we're accomplishing, but the credit goes to the students and families and schools that have built such a record of success," says Doug Tuthill, president of the Florida School Choice Fund, the organization that oversees the scholarships. "We know that as long as our students keep doing well our support will only grow."

In May, state lawmakers expanded the program to reach roughly 25,000 low-income students and did so with strong bipartisan support in both chambers and a combined approval rate of 74 percent.

In the Senate, more than a third of the Democrats and more than half of the Black Caucus voted in favor of expansion. Sen. Al Lawson, a Tallahassee Democrat who sponsored the bill, was emphatic: "I am the strongest possible supporter of public education. But I know that not every school works for every child." Rep. Bill Heller, a St. Petersburg Democrat and former university dean, said: "If this gives a parent a chance to provide a different education, it's hard to argue against it. What's the price on a child who turns himself around?"

The recent appointment of Tuthill, who is a former teacher union president in Pinellas County, has caused a stir in public education circles and among people who have previously opposed SUFS Scholarships, also known as Corporate Tax Credit Scholarships. Ron Matus, education reporter for

the St. Petersburg Times, wrote that: "His hiring may be another sign that the bitter political lines over vouchers are not as hard and fast as they were just a few years ago." Wayne Garcia, a political commentator for Creative Loafing, wrote: "Perhaps we're closing in on a middle ground in Florida education reform where smart folks on both sides of the voucher issue can get something good done."

A recent poll conducted for Harvard University and Education Next researchers reflects a growing public embrace of school choice options. The poll, conducted nationwide in February and March, reported that people support Corporate Tax Credit Scholarships by a margin of 54 percent to 28 percent. African-Americans support the scholarships by a margin of 63-to-19.

**INSIDE:** Find out if you qualify for a free cell phone and other great articles.



**Debra Garza presented Gov. Crist and scholarship students with a \$26 million donation for scholarships on behalf of Walgreens**

*story continued from front page*

officer for more than 35 years and the first African-American sheriff in Florida in more than 100 years, was the featured speaker. Glover said he is a strong believer that the most effective tool in combating crime is education, and he dedicates his time these days to encouraging students to stay in school and pursue higher education.

“The reality of what our youth face today is devastating,” Glover said. “Just last year, more than 4,100 Duval County youth were charged with delinquent crimes and 18 percent of those were charged with committing violent felony offenses. The link missing for many of these children is the proper education.”

In its first six years, the program has been funded by more than \$400-million in corporate contributions by companies such as Walgreens, PSS World Medical and Fidelity National Financial, which were acknowledged at the event for their commitment to low-income students.

“Our contributions over the past three years have provided scholarships for more than 6,500 children throughout Florida, giving them the opportunity to receive the education they deserve,” said Debra Garza, Divisional Vice President of Government and Community Relations for Walgreens. “It’s only right that we give back to those families who make our community strong – because our companies couldn’t exist without them.”

The rally, called “More Choices, Better Futures,” is held each year to recognize the vital role that corporations play in the program. Walgreens itself has contributed \$26-million to the Step Up For Students Scholarships since 2006. Fidelity presented a check for \$2.3-million and PSS World a check for \$1-million.

 This is the official newsletter for Step Up For Students, published four times a year.

**About Step Up For Students:** Our mission is to help alleviate the enormous educational challenges faced by children from low-income and working class families. The scholarships allow these students to consider a private school or an out-of-district public school that may better suit their individual needs. This choice is not based on whether the public school is judged as succeeding or failing. Rather, it recognizes that different children learn in different ways and that our collective struggle is to help the students who often are at the greatest disadvantage in modern education.

Chairman: **John Kirtley**  
President: **Doug Tuthill**  
Chief Financial Officer: **Kim Dyson**  
Director of Fundraising and Development: **Kerri Vaughan**  
Director of Community Outreach: **Michael Benjamin**  
Communications Director: **Jon East**  
Communications Specialist: **Jillian Metz**

337 S. Plant Avenue, Tampa, Florida 33606  
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## Affordable Legal Services Offered Through Pre-Paid Legal Services Inc.

Do you need legal advice, but the cost is too much to bear? Through Pre-Paid Legal Services Inc. (PPL) you may be eligible to receive legal services at a reduced fee.

A PPL plan covers the member, spouse or significant other and any dependent children for a low monthly fee. Read below to see if qualified lawyers can help you with your needs.

### INCLUDED IN ALL MEMBERSHIP PLANS IS:

- ➔ Legal Consultation and Advice
- ➔ Letter Writing and Phone Call services
- ➔ Contract and Document Review
- ➔ Will Preparation
- ➔ Motor Vehicle Legal Services
- ➔ IRS Audit Legal Services
- ➔ 24/7 Legal Shield
- ➔ Preferred Member Discount of 25%

For an additional fee, PPL also offers up to 75 hours of additional Trial Defense Services and enrollment in the Identity Theft Shield program.

### PLANS AND PRICING:

<b>Family Plan</b>	
Trial Defense	\$26.00/month
Identity Theft Shield	\$35.95/month
<hr/>	
<b>Standard Plan</b>	
Trial Defense	\$17.00/month
Identity Theft Shield	\$26.95/month
<hr/>	
<b>Identity Theft Shield ONLY</b>	
	\$12.95/month

If you would like to learn more about the program, contact Daryl Jones at (305) 218-1547 or (786) 231-7725. Also, visit [www.prepaidlegal.com/hub/djones20](http://www.prepaidlegal.com/hub/djones20).

## Discounted Drug Card Program

Are your prescriptions getting expensive? We may have an answer that will help you with the rising cost of prescriptions.

The Florida Discount Drug Card was designed to lower the costs of prescription drugs to those low-income families in Florida who do not have prescription drug insurance, including Medicaid.

Savings vary depending on the specifics of the prescription drug. On 10 commonly prescribed drugs, savings ranged from 5 to 42 percent off of the regular price.

### TO QUALIFY, AN INDIVIDUAL MUST BE:

- ➔ Age 60 or older; ➔ Without prescription drug coverage or who fall into the Medicare Prescription Drug Coverage gap
- OR**
- ➔ Under age 60; ➔ Without prescription drug coverage; ➔ With an annual family income of less than 300 percent of the Federal Poverty Level;
- ➔ Qualifying incomes include those below the following:
  - \$30,636 (for an individual); \$41,076 (for a family of two); \$61,956 (for a family of four); For larger families, visit [www.FloridaDiscountDrugCard.com](http://www.FloridaDiscountDrugCard.com) for income guidelines

The card may be used at any participating pharmacy, or drugs may be ordered in 90-day supplies delivered to a home or office address. To see if your pharmacy participates in the Discount Drug Program, visit [www.FloridaDiscountDrugCard.com](http://www.FloridaDiscountDrugCard.com)

Individuals and families who believe they are eligible for the Florida Discount Drug Card may enroll conveniently online at [www.FloridaDiscountDrugCard.com](http://www.FloridaDiscountDrugCard.com) or by telephone at 1-866-341-8894.



**Doug Tuthill**  
President

## Meet the Scholarship Staff

Meet Doug Tuthill, who comes to Step Up For Students as a longtime supporter and influencer of K-12 education in Florida. Having joined the scholarship team this past August, Doug has made a seamless transition as president.

Day to day, Doug works diligently to unite the scholarship staff in their efforts to expand and improve educational choices for the parents of low-income students in Florida. Furthermore, Doug draws upon his experiences as a classroom teacher, policy advocate and teacher union president to bring together Florida's education organizations, unions and policy-makers with one goal in mind: to ensure a quality of education for all underprivileged children in the state of Florida.

When not in the office, Doug stays busy by going to the gym, working in the yard with his wife and reading historical biographies. Have a question for Doug? He'd love to hear from you at [dtuthill@stepupforstudents.com](mailto:dtuthill@stepupforstudents.com).

## Free Cell Phone Service for Low-Income Families

If your child is benefitting from a Step Up For Students Scholarship, you may qualify to receive free cell phone service through SafeLink Wireless, provided by Lifeline Assistance. SafeLink provides free cellular service, a cell phone, and minutes every month. SafeLink Wireless Service does not cost anything – there are no contracts, no recurring fees and no monthly charges.

Included in the wireless plan is 68 free minutes each month for up to one year, unlimited access to emergency service numbers, such as 911, and on-demand features, including voicemail, text messaging, call waiting and

caller ID. If you need additional minutes, you can buy TracFone Airtime Cards at any TracFone retailer Walmart, Walgreens, Family Dollar, etc.

To qualify, you need to have a postal address (not a P.O. Box) and no one in your household can currently be receiving LifeLine Services through another phone carrier.

There are two sets of qualifying guidelines. Households can either be benefitting from a program listed under #1 OR they have to qualify based on household income listed in #2. Please see below to find out if you could receive a free cell phone.

### YOU MAY QUALIFY FOR SAFELINK IF:

**1** You already participate in one of the following assistance programs:

- ➔ Federal Public Housing Assistance / Section 8
- ➔ Food Stamps
- ➔ Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP)
- ➔ Supplemental Security Income (SSI)
- ➔ Free or Reduced Lunch
- ➔ Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)
- ➔ Medicaid
- ➔ Bureau of Indian Affairs Programs (Tribal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Head Start Subsidy, NSLP)

**OR**

**2** Your total household income is at or below 135% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines. The table below provides the maximum income you can have to be eligible for service.

Number Persons in Household	Annual Income	Monthly Income
1	\$14,040	\$1,170
2	\$18,900	\$1,575
3	\$23,760	\$1,980
4	\$28,620	\$2,385
5	\$33,480	\$2,790
For each additional person, add...	\$4,860	\$405

To apply to receive a **FREE** SafeLink cell phone, please go online to fill out an application at [www.safelinkwireless.com](http://www.safelinkwireless.com) or call **1-800-378-1684**.

## Donor Corner: Lowe's



With \$48.3 billion in sales last year, Lowe's Companies, Inc., is the second largest home improvement retailer worldwide and the ninth

largest retailer in the U.S. In addition to helping homeowners improve their properties, Lowe's is also helping to build strong communities through its support of community and education initiatives, including the Step Up For Students Scholarship Program. A partner of Step Up For Students (SUFS) since 2005, Lowe's has made it possible for thousands of children to build the educational foundation for success.

Lowe's first joined SUFS in 2005 and since that time has donated \$32 million to the program, providing scholarships for more than 8,727 children. The company has also sponsored the Annual Step Up For Students Donor Appreciation Rally since 2005. Additionally, Jim Chaffman, Lowe's Regional Vice President, serves on the Step Up For Students advisory board.

"Lowe's has long been committed to supporting education, and we are pleased to have the opportunity to help students in Florida through the Step Up For Students program," said Jim Chaffman, Lowe's regional vice president of store operations. "By helping students become successful in school today, we know we are supporting the community leaders, employees and customers of tomorrow."

Founded in 1946 as a small hardware store in North Carolina, Lowe's has expanded to more than 1,575 stores throughout the U.S. and Canada, providing do-it-yourself homeowners with the tools needed to improve the values of their properties. With the company's growth came a strong commitment to the neighborhoods it serves. In addition to its support of SUFS, Lowe's is a national partner of Habitat for Humanity and American Red Cross, and provides assistance for natural disaster recovery and initiatives that work to improve communities. In 2007, the Lowe's Charitable and Educational Foundation contributed more than \$27.5 million to schools and community organizations throughout the U.S. and Canada.

We applaud Lowe's for its commitment to building strong communities and for giving Florida's children the tools for a bright future.