



Florida School Choice Fund  
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## IMPORTANT UPDATES ON PARENTAL CHOICE IN FLORIDA.

# Student Spotlight

► **Leticia Roig**, Roblanca Academy, Hialeah, FL



Leticia Roig was being told to repeat third grade, and her failure just didn't compute. So her mother took Leticia to a small private school with a large Hispanic enrollment and a no-nonsense principal. The assessment was quick and direct: Leticia didn't comprehend English.

"How can you pass the FCAT if you don't understand the language?" asks Alina Santos, principal at Roblanca Academy in Hialeah. "I see some of these kids being labeled with special academic problems, but all they need is to learn the language."

How Leticia was able to survive in a public school program for foreign language speakers for four years without learning English was confounding to Santos, but there was no time for looking back. The lessons began immediately last summer, as Roblanca instructors worked one-on-one with Leticia for four weeks before the regular school year began. They immersed her in English, helped her role play situations she encounters with other students in school and begin to absorb and embellish upon written stories. They worked on basic grammar and sentence structure. And Santos told Leticia's parents: No Spanish television or radio at home, only English.

By the time regular classes began, Leticia was a different,

confident, fourth-grade student.

"The change I have seen in her is enormous," says Oneida Vazquez, her mother, through an interpreter. "She is so much happier. She was so afraid to be around other children because she didn't want them to know she couldn't understand them. Now she's doing all the activities at school, and she loves her classes."

In August, Leticia began her second year at Roblanca, made possible through a Step Up For Students scholarship for low-income families. The principal, Ms. Santos, says Leticia is "doing awesome" in her academic classes, including language arts and reading, two of the subjects she had been failing. She scored well on the Terra Nova norm-referenced test last spring, without the aid of a bilingual dictionary. She also has been exposed to the stories of Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty and other children's classics.

For Leticia, school now also includes participation in plays and talent events and fashion shows. She likes music and dance and basketball. "They treat us with such respect," Leticia says. "The school just seems a lot better. There are fewer students, and it is easier to concentrate."

Her mother Oneida says she is grateful for the Step Up scholarship, which she heard about from a friend. "I was watching my daughter fail and I was trying to get a tutor and it just wasn't working," Oneida says. "We could never have afforded this without the scholarship."

### About Roblanca Academy

Roblanca Academy is located at 1174 W. 70th Place in Hialeah and was founded in 1982. It serves roughly 120 students in preK-8, of which 22 were on the Step Up Scholarship for the 2008-2009 school year. The school emphasizes pride in the community and service and responsibility to others, and principal Santos describes the atmosphere as "like a big extended family." About 80 percent of the students are Hispanic, and the school administers the Terra Nova Achievement Test each spring to gauge the learning gains of students. The annual tuition and fees are \$3,900.

Want to nominate your student for our Student Spotlight?

Visit <http://www.stepupforstudents.org/tellus.php> to send us your story.

Or contact Adam Emerson at [aemerson@stepupforstudents.org](mailto:aemerson@stepupforstudents.org) or call (866) 753-0985, Ext. 233

## 'We all want to help teachers'

Leaders from Step Up for Students, the Hillsborough teachers union and the Hillsborough school district agree to a partnership that experts are calling unprecedented.



"Whatever school they attend, they're still our children."

**Jean Clements**,  
president of the  
Hillsborough Teachers  
Association



"These are strong organizations with visionary leaders ..."

**Doug Tuthill**,  
president of Step  
Up For Students



"Ultimately, we all want to help teachers get better, wherever they're teaching our kids." **MaryEllen Elia**,  
superintendent of  
Hillsborough County  
Public Schools



"This project is a great example of how we can all work together to help low-income children succeed." **John Kirtley**,  
chairman of Step Up  
For Students

See story, front page



# NEWSLETTER



## Step Up For Students teams with union, school district to train teachers

Students won't be the only ones receiving lessons in this new school year. Step Up For Students has entered into a unique partnership with a teachers union and a public school district in order to help teachers improve their classroom skills as well.

The Center for Technology and Education in Tampa, a teacher-training center developed by the Hillsborough Classroom Teachers Association and Hillsborough County Public Schools, has joined forces with Step Up to offer more courses and begin offering them to educators in schools that participate in the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program.

Step Up For Students will provide at least \$100,000 to develop the courses and offset course fees for teachers whose students receive the scholarship. The funding was made possible by gifts from the Walton Family Foundation and from John Kirtley, the chairman of Step Up for Students.

Jean Clements, president of the Hillsborough Classroom Teachers Association, called the agreement one that would have a profound impact on Florida's most economically disadvantaged children.

"Whatever school they attend, they're still our children," Clements said.

Doug Tuthill, president of Step Up For Students and former president of the Pinellas Classroom Teachers Association, said the partnership breaks new ground between a

teachers union, a public school district and a group that advocates empowering parents to choose the school that best meets their child's needs – public or private.

"These are strong organizations with visionary leaders who share our commitment to helping teachers, parents and students find the learning environments that best meet their needs," Tuthill said.

Hillsborough schools Superintendent MaryEllen Elia said the children served by Step Up For Students are a part of the community, and many return to public schools for their secondary education.

"Ultimately, we all want to help teachers get better, wherever they're teaching our kids," Elia said.

Added Clements: "This is not a competition. It's about all of us doing our best to help children who come from very difficult circumstances. I can't ignore the legitimate needs these children have."

Kirtley also praised the leadership of the union and the school district. "I am very grateful for the leadership of MaryEllen and Jean," he said. "This project is a great example of how we can all work together to help low-income children succeed."



**Under an agreement with Step Up For Students, the Hillsborough County teachers union and the county school district will open their professional development program to private school teachers.**

Currently, teachers in 14 Florida school districts take online professional development courses offered by the Center for Technology and Education. Expanding that will lead to increased student achievement, said Jack Davis, the center's executive director.

"In that sense," Davis said, "we share a common goal."

The partnership is part of a new initiative called Step Up For Schools, which is aimed at helping teachers and their schools continue to improve teaching techniques and access grants and other funds that are available to them. Step Up For Schools helped to provide back-to-school training in August to Tampa Bay Christian Academy in Tampa and Cornerstone Christian School in Jacksonville.

See 'We all want to help teachers,' back page

## A marine takes charge

A decorated career Marine who led strategic planning, prepared and delivered briefings to the White House, the Defense Department, and Congress and literally wrote the book on military leadership is ready for his next command – Step Up For Students.

John LeHockey, a retired U.S. Marine Corps Colonel who has become a sought-after corporate leader, is the new executive director for the scholarship organization. He says his first order of business is to make the scholarship process friendlier for families and schools.



John LeHockey

"Our goal remains exceptional customer service," LeHockey says. "That means easier applications and easier renewals for our parents and our schools."

LeHockey most recently served as vice president for Affiliated Computer Services and was chief operating officer for the School Employees Retirement System in Ohio. He has become a hot corporate commodity because of his skill in focusing companies on their objectives and devising processes to make them more responsive and profitable.

While in the Marines, he also directed officer candidate training and co-wrote the book *Leading Marines*.

In accepting the job at Step Up For Students, he says he is returning to the kind of role he cherishes most: "It's so satisfying to think that I might help to make a difference in the educational lives of the children we serve."

LeHockey will lead a merged organization that serves the entire state. Florida P.R.I.D.E. and Children First Florida, the two scholarship funding organizations that used to serve different parts of the state, joined forces this summer in an attempt to create administrative efficiencies and improve services for families. LeHockey wants to use that transition to Step Up For Students as an opportunity to survey families and schools and reach out to low-income families that are still unaware of the scholarship.



## Study: Program students keeping pace with all students nationally

The first academic report card on the Step Up For Students program was released this summer, and give your children a round of applause. The study found that children in the program are keeping pace with their counterparts in the state's public schools and with all students nationally.

The report covered the 2007-08 school year, and said that scholarship participants "tend to be among the lowest-performing students in their prior school" and that "test score gains for program participants are similar in magnitude to comparable students in the public schools." The report also said scholarship students are much poorer than the average student on free and reduced lunch in public schools.

Doug Tuthill, president of Step Up For Students, said he was pleased. "It's gratifying to see how well these students stack up against a comparison group that apparently has higher incomes," Tuthill said. "We'll need more years of data to draw more definitive conclusions, but this is an impressive start for a program that serves our state's neediest children."

The report, conducted by respected University of Florida and Northwestern University researcher David Figlio, is the

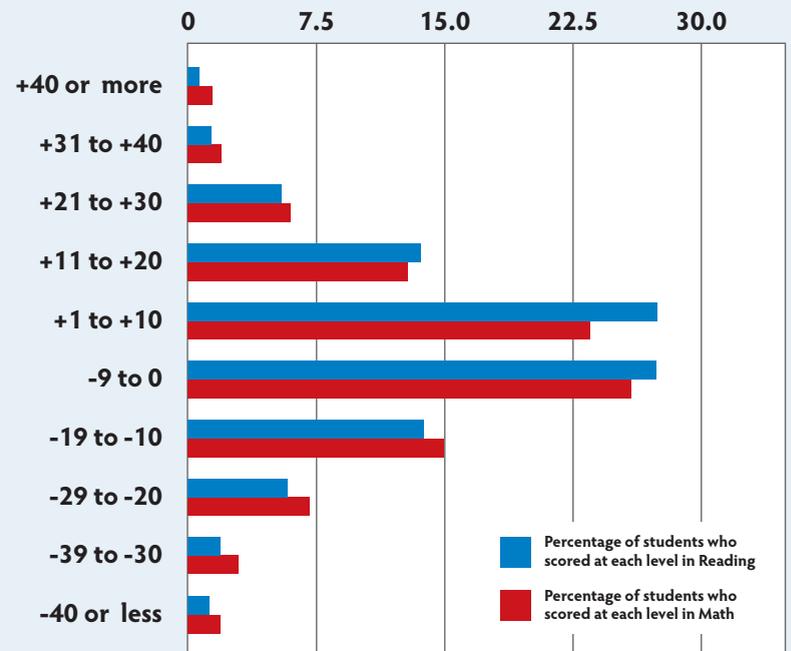
result of a 2006 law that requires every scholarship student to take a nationally norm-referenced test. Some 71 percent of scholarship students take the Stanford Achievement Test, and another 20 percent take the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. The rest take a variety of state-approved tests.

Though the comparisons with public school students were hard to make, the report delivered a strong statement about national rankings. In 2007-08, scholarship students ranked at the 45th percentile in reading and 46th percent in math against a national sample that included students from all income levels. Even more telling, scholarship students recorded the same year-to-year gain in reading and math as the entire national group. "In other words," the report stated, "the typical student participating in the program tended to maintain his or her relative position in comparison with others nationwide."

Figlio was able to drill down into the data and dispel the myth that the program skims the highest-achieving students from public schools. "Scholarship participants tend to be considerably more disadvantaged and lower-performing than their non-participating counterparts," he wrote.

### How much are students learning?

This chart shows how much students learned from one year to the next, compared to a national sample that includes students of all income levels. In this case, 0 means the student has kept pace with all students nationally.



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**
- Development Director: **Kerri Vaughan**
- Scholarship Director: **John LeHockey**
- Director of Community Outreach: **Michael Benjamin**
- Communications Director: **Jon East**
- Assistant Communications Director: **Adam Emerson**

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## Most families in program 'very satisfied'

Families benefitting from the Step Up For Students scholarship are overwhelmingly satisfied with the schools they have chosen and with their child's academic progress. That's the conclusion of a study released by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice.

Eighty percent of families in the program surveyed said they were "very satisfied" with the academic progress their children are making and with the individual attention their children now receive. Additionally, 76 percent said they were "very satisfied" with the teacher quality in their current schools and with their schools' responsiveness to their needs. Overall, 97 percent of parents said they were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the academic progress.

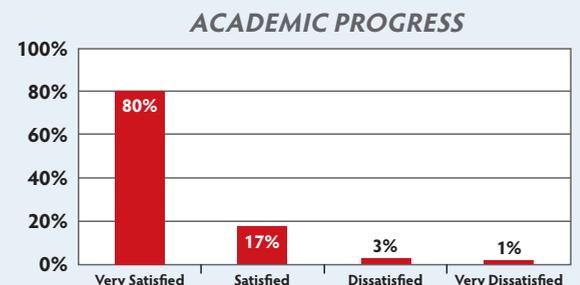
Asked to rate their schools on a scale from one to ten, 94 percent of the parents surveyed gave their current schools at least a seven.

"In this first-ever empirical evaluation of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program, we have found remarkably higher levels of parental and family satisfaction with the private schools their children attend," said Robert Enlow, president and CEO of the Indianapolis-based Friedman Foundation. "The opinions of the parents are clear: They appreciate the opportunities given their children under this program, and they appreciate the options that the program gives them."

The telephone survey of 808 parents was conducted between July 6 and 16. The results were then analyzed by Friedman senior fellow Greg Forster and policy analyst Christian D'Andrea.

### What scholarship parents are thinking

These are the Friedman findings about how Step Up parents rate the academic progress of their children.



Forster and D'Andrea found 128 parents who were unlikely to continue in the program, but those parents said dissatisfaction had nothing to do with their decision. All of them said the program should continue to thrive.

"These results echo what we hear directly from parents on our program: They are satisfied with their children's progress and happy with their chosen schools," said John Kirtley, the chairman of Step Up For Students. "We know that many low-income families are also pleased with the public schools their children attend. The great news is that they all can choose the learning environment that works best for each child."



## Donor Corner: LabCorp

Headquartered in Burlington, N.C., LabCorp operates a sophisticated laboratory network with more than 28,000 employees worldwide. LabCorp was established in 1971 and today is one of the world's largest clinical laboratories.

Best known for pioneering genomic testing and the commercialization of new diagnostic technologies, LabCorp continues to attract the leading minds and technological pioneers in the field. In fact, more than one million tests on approximately 400,000 samples are performed each day.

Recognized for its innovation, quality and customer convenience, LabCorp also places a strong emphasis on giving back to the communities that it serves. LabCorp's charitable contributions are focused on programs that inspire education and learning, promote health and well-being and increase access to the arts.

LabCorp has a long history of providing financial assistance to non-profit organizations; its employees donate thousands of hours of their time giving back to the communities where they live and work. Collectively, their efforts have assisted the less fortunate, supported the arts and mentored the youth.

In 2009, LabCorp is supporting the Step Up For Students' mission of providing educational opportunities to underprivileged families in Florida. In accordance with the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program administered by the Florida Department of Revenue, LabCorp is contributing \$2.25 million that will fund approximately 560 scholarships.

"As leaders in the laboratory industry, we are honored to be able to support Step Up For Students in leading the way to a better future for many families in Florida," said David P. King, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer.

LabCorp's commitment to organizations like Step Up For Students has allowed it to become partners with communities it serves and has made the company a more rewarding place to work.



## Bay Area Legal Services

If you're living in the Tampa Bay area and you need legal services but can't afford them, you may qualify for help from Bay Area Legal Services. Bay Area Legal Services provides free counseling and representation to eligible clients for civil legal problems.

### SERVICES INCLUDE:

- ➔ Family law
- ➔ Senior advocacy
- ➔ Volunteer lawyers
- ➔ Fair housing
- ➔ Consumer law
- ➔ Individual rights

### SPECIAL PROGRAMS INCLUDE:

- ➔ Caregiver advocacy programs
- ➔ ChildNet
- ➔ Family Justice Center
- ➔ Judge Don Castor Community Law Center
- ➔ Legal Information Center
- ➔ Low Income Taxpayer Clinic

If you would like to learn more about the programs or to find out if you're eligible, contact Bay Area Legal Services at (813) 232-1343, or visit [www.bals.org](http://www.bals.org).

If you live outside the Tampa Bay area, Bay Area Legal Services can help you find similar legal services where you live.

## Swine Flu Update

Many schools are preparing for a spike in the number of swine flu cases this fall. But don't panic. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has issued new recommendations for stopping the spread of the virus.

Most importantly, keep your children home if they're sick or showing flu-like symptoms such as fever, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills and fatigue. Many people infected with the illness have experienced diarrhea and vomiting, but most people who have been sick have recovered without needing medical treatment.

If one family member is ill, students should stay home for five days from the day the illness develops, according to the most recent federal guidelines. Students can return to school 24 hours after the fever is gone.

The government is urging school officials to stay calm. CDC directors say closing schools is rarely warranted, but urge keeping sick children away from classmates until they can be sent home. Administrators should consider closing a school if large numbers of children come down with swine flu or if most of the children have special medical needs.

### PRACTICE GOOD HYGIENE:

- ➔ Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze.
- ➔ Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it.
- ➔ Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hand cleaners are also effective.
- ➔ Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- ➔ Try to avoid close contact with sick people.

