



STEP UP FOR STUDENTS Newsletter

We provide scholarships for low-income Florida schoolchildren and believe in equal educational opportunity.

Step Up For Students celebrates 10 years of serving low-income Florida schoolchildren



Florida Gov. Rick Scott was the keynote speaker at Step Up For Students' 10-year anniversary celebration on Dec. 12 at the Tampa Museum of Art. Below, Cheryl Valladares, who is raising her two grandsons both on Step Up, told her family's story.



Step Up For Students' supporters gathered Dec. 12 at the Tampa Museum of Art to celebrate 10 years of parental choice in Florida, which has given tens of thousands of low-income families the means to select the K-12 school that best fits their students' needs.

Founder and Chairman John Kirtley was joined by Florida Gov. Rick Scott, Florida House Speaker Will Weatherford, other legislators, corporate donors, scholarship recipients and their families, as well as other community supporters, to celebrate a decade of school choice, program growth and to ponder the future.

Since the Florida Legislature created the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program in 2001, it has grown both in support and numbers.

"I first saw the power of this idea in 1998, when our privately funded scholarship program here in Tampa Bay received 12,000 applications from low-income parents for just 700 scholarships," Kirtley said during the dinner event. "The power of this idea brings people great distances philosophically. In seven years, we went from having no members of the Legislative Black Caucus supporting the program, to a majority."

The governor urged others to continue supporting the program and vowed he would not only do the same, but take it a step further.

"My goal is - a lot of things that you've started, to make sure that we continue them - when I finish this job, every student, every child

in this state has a choice. That would be a great day," he said.

Scott also said leaders nationwide are watching what Florida has done in education.

"What John started, and what you're continuing, is forcing the rest of the country to change because they see how well Florida is doing," he said pointing out recent test scores placing Florida fourth-grade students on top of the list for international reading scores.

Step Up For Students President Doug Tuthill told the crowd of about 150 guests that the people involved in the organization are passionate about providing equal opportunity to all Florida students. He also said the foundation of success is for kindergarten through 12th grade students having full school choice. That's what Step Up works toward, he said.

"And in the past 10 years, we have provided scholarships ... for 271,536 children. That is over \$1.1 billion in scholarships," Tuthill said. "This growth stems from the merger of hope and opportunity because we have found that when you bring hope and opportunity together, magic happens."

Tuthill recalled a discussion with Weatherford from two years before, when the representative was sponsoring a bill that provided for major expansion of the scholarship, allowing it to grow in response to increasing demand.

"We talked about our dreams, what we'd like to see and what he'd like to accomplish as the speaker and he said, 'You know I would be thrilled

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“When you bring hope and opportunity together, magic happens.”

-Doug Tuthill



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if at the end of my two years as speaker we could get 50,000 kids on scholarship.’ And tonight I have a special announcement for Speaker Weatherford, which is,” Tuthill said, walking over and removing a black drape off a large poster set on an easel. The poster read: “Department of Education reports 2012-13 Tax Credit Scholarship enrollment 50,821.” Tuthill bowed and applause erupted. “Mission accomplished, sir,” Tuthill said, looking toward Weatherford, who was sworn in as speaker in November. “50,821.”

Two of those students on scholarship this year are Cheryl Valladares’ grandsons. She told the story about raising Isaiah and Benjamin Vargas, after her daughter started abusing drugs. (Her full story can be read on page 3 of this newsletter)

“I really believe Step Up saved my boys,” she said.

And Step Up mother Faith Manuel told of how she was only 15 when she gave birth to her first son, Davion Manuel-McKenney, and once

he reached middle-school age she didn’t want to send him to his neighborhood school where there were instances of violence. (Their story can be found at www.StepUpForStudents.org)

“Of course, I found Step Up For Students and I can’t even describe my elation and gratitude when we learned we were accepted,” she said. “I actually remember jumping for joy.”

Davion graduated as a Step Up Scholar in 2012 and just completed his first semester at Florida State College in Jacksonville.

“I am so thankful for the scholarship program, my parents and to everyone else who has helped me along the way,” he said. “It’s my goal to continue making everyone proud.”

Three donors also spoke during the event’s program: Robert Drinon, CEO of Premier Beverage Company; Bryan Anderson, vice president of government relations for HCA Healthcare’s National Group; T. David Lewis, CEO of UnitedHealthcare Central and North Florida Division. The three companies’ combined giving to Step Up is \$138 million. Each vowed to pledge more.

Kirtley thanked all involved in parental choice movement and encouraged supporters to stay involved for the sake of all Florida schoolchildren.

“But let me thank you on behalf of not just the families on our program, but on behalf of all the families in Florida who want the best education for their children,” he said. “I bring from them an urgent message: Keep fighting to improve the outcomes for all of Florida’s children. Keep fighting until every parent can choose the best learning environment for their child, regardless of provider or delivery method.”

Donor Corner



AT&T is synonymous with worldwide communications and telecommunication innovations in part for providing service in more than 225 countries and covering 275 million mobile-phone users.

It is also a company rich in history, going back to the inventor of the telephone himself, Alexander Graham Bell, whose father-in-law in 1876 founded the company that evolved into AT&T. But what many consumers probably don’t realize is the company’s commitment to the communities it serves and its dedication to advancing education, said Marshall Criser III, president of AT&T Florida.

Headquartered in Dallas, Texas, AT&T has long supported such initiatives that create learning opportunities and promote economic achievement. In Florida alone over the last four years, the company has contributed more than \$16.6 million to community programs through corporate and AT&T Foundation giving programs, including Aspire Grants. Through mentoring programs, these grants help more students graduate from high school ready for careers and college.

“We make a very conscious decision to invest in our community in part because we know it’s our employees, it’s our customers, it’s our shareholders,” Criser said. “But we also want to help raise the bar in achieving education. All of this is about building stronger communities.”

While supporting these programs, AT&T has also partnered with Step Up For Students. In six years of its donor history to the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program, the company has redirected \$19.2 million, equating to more than 4,600 Step Up scholarships.

“When we took a look at what the mission and vision was (of Step Up), it was very much aligned with ours,” said Criser. “How do we give young people and their families the inspiration and the tools to achieve academic success? It (the program) really leverages parents who are looking for the best opportunities for their kids in education and match those with resources and tools with the desire to learn.”

Criser said they look at the redirections to mean much more than a simple donation.

“We don’t call these gifts,” he said. “We call these investments in the future.”

DONOR UPDATE

In 2012, the corporate community generously answered the call and stepped up for Florida’s low-income children in a way like never before. The companies enabled Step Up For Students to reach the fundraising cap, which was \$54 million higher than 2011, in record time. The \$229 million cap was reached in July, solidifying the promise of a personalized education for the more than 50,000 children who are enrolled in

the 2012-13 school year.

It is with grateful appreciation that Step Up For Students recognizes those corporations that demonstrated new or renewed resolve to provide quality education options to low-income children in Florida through a financial commitment made in 2012.

-Debbie Woerner, *Step Up’s executive vice president for development*

- 3M Company
- Allstate Insurance Company
- American Integrity Insurance Group
- AT&T
- BankUnited
- Bernie Little Distributors, Inc.
- Brown & Brown, Inc.
- Brown Distributing Company
- Burkhardt Distributing Company, Inc.
- Capacity Insurance Company
- Carroll Distributing Company
- Centennial Bank, Inc.
- CenterState Bank of Florida, NA
- Citizens First Bank
- City Beverages Orlando
- Coastal Beverage, Ltd.
- Cone Distributing
- Cypress Property & Casualty Insurance Company
- Daytona Beverages, LLC
- DeVry Inc.
- Dick’s Sporting Goods
- Euler Hermes North America Insurance Company
- EverBank
- FCCI
- Fidelity National Indemnity Insurance Company
- First Professionals Insurance Company

- Florida Doctors Insurance Company
- Florida East Coast Railway, LLC
- Florida Family Insurance Company
- Gap, Inc.
- GEICO
- Gold Coast Beverage Distributors, Inc.
- Gold Coast Eagle Distributing, L.P
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- Gulfstream Property & Casualty Insurance Company
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- JM Family Enterprises, Inc.
- Johnson & Johnson
- Johnson Brothers Liquor Co. of Florida, Inc.
- Kforce
- Lender Processing Services
- Liberty Mutual Group
- Lincoln Heritage Life Insurance Company
- Lowe’s
- MEDNAX Services, Inc.
- Mercury Insurance Company of Florida
- New York Life Insurance
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- Peace River Distributing, Inc.

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- Philadelphia Insurance Companies
- Premier Beverage Company
- Prudential Financial, Inc.
- QBE Insurance Corporation
- QR Energy, LP
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- Rosen Hotels & Resorts, Inc.
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- Saddle Creek Corporation
- Safety National Casualty Corporation
- Schneider Electric
- Seavin, Inc./ Lakeridge Winery & Vineyards and San Sebastian Winery
- Southern Eagle Distributing, Inc.
- Southern Wine and Spirits of America, Inc.
- St. Johns Insurance Company, Inc.
- Stein Mart, Inc.
- Sunshine State Insurance Company
- Tempur-Pedic North America, LLC
- The Doctors Company/FPIC and APAC
- The Progressive Group of Insurance Companies
- Tractor Supply Company
- Transamerica
- Trust Companies of America
- Uretek Holdings, Inc.
- U.S. Bank National Association
- Kemper Corporation
- UnitedHealthcare
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- Wayne Densch, Inc.
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- Winn-Dixie Stores, Inc.
- Wyndham Vacation Ownership
- YUM! Brands

COMPANIES: Claim Your Tax Credits

If your company has enrolled in the Step Up For Students Program this year and has not yet notified us, please let us know so that we can extend our gratitude to you and assist your company with taking the necessary steps to receive your tax credits, including the required certificate of contribution for your tax returns. E-mail [Debbie Woerner at dwoerner@sufs.org](mailto:dwoerner@sufs.org).

-Debbie Woerner, *Step Up’s executive vice president for development*

SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT

Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic School

A walk through the doors of Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic School and immediately visitors will see the subtle differences from more traditional Catholic schools. The first sign might be the Ikea furniture and an Andy Warhol-style painting of Jesus hanging in the lobby.

A nearby hallway leading to classrooms is bright and cheerfully painted with a Noah's Ark theme. But it's the sound of clarion voices singing that really beckons from down the hall.

Follow it behind a door and there's a party going on. Hands are waving in the air, hips are swaying and the class is full of singing second-graders. The petite and energetic teacher, Carolyn Wong-Stark, shouts out, "Raise the roof!" The children are smiling and enthusiastically engaged.

And why shouldn't they be? There's something to celebrate. OLL is in the midst of its Golden Jubilee.

More than 50 years ago, on a pilgrimage in Lourdes, France, the school's founder Monsignor William W. DuBois got a call from his bishop and was charged with starting a parish in Dunedin, Fla. It wasn't long after Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church opened in 1958, that he realized the need and opportunity to build a school.

With a legal pad and pen, he waited with his secretary in what is now the school's lobby, but then part of the church building. As with everything the monsignor did, it was an exercise in faith.



Renée N. Stoeckle and kindergarten student Dakota McCouish-Glock share a smile in the halls of Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic School.

"They just sat there and prayed that someone would come sign up to go to their school," said vice principal Renée Stoeckle. "They got a handful that day."

On Sept. 4, 1962, Our Lady of Lourdes opened with 72 students in grades kindergarten through fourth. Fifty years later, the school has 234 students, including 49 Step Up For Students scholars, and offers pre-kindergarten through eighth grade classes.

Not only has enrollment ballooned, the school has grown with the addition of several classrooms, including a state-of-the-art science lab and a computer lab. In 2004, the Father Conmy Center, a large multi-purpose facility, was built to be shared with the parish and is used for gym classes and after-school sports.

OLL also added track and athletic fields to house its 20 sports teams. The list of extracurricular programs includes robotics, cake decorating and student council. All of the activities foster well-rounded children, said Stoeckle. The school has also kept up with technology using SMART Boards, which are interactive classroom white boards, MacBook computers and iPads. While school leaders are passionate about integrating technology, educational traditions such as art and music classes remain. The school administers the Iowa Assessments to measure academic success.

But what is perhaps one of the most alluring attributes of the school besides its academics, Stoeckle says, is something that can't be bought.

"There's such a sense of community that they know this is a safe place and they know this is home," said Stoeckle. "It's a great place to grow up really."

That's exactly why Carol MacLean sent her five children to OLL. "It just felt like home," she said.

MacLean is not only an OLL parent, she teaches advanced math to fifth-through eighth-graders at the school. And her eldest child, Tracy Mueller, teaches there as well.

"I got such a great education here that it helped me through high school and college," said Mueller, who teaches first grade said. "I'm working to do the same for all of my students."



Isaiah Vargas, left, and his brother Benjamin.

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

Isaiah Vargas / New Jerusalem Christian Academy

Isaiah Vargas entered the world addicted to drugs.

As the toxins were purged from his tiny body in the hospital, he had repeated seizures and fought to stay alive. His first two months of life were spent in the neonatal intensive care unit, said his grandmother, Cheryl Valladares.

"They didn't give us a good prognosis on him," she said.

But Isaiah is now a fourth-grade Step Up For Students scholar at New Jerusalem Christian Academy in Seffner and excels academically. The 10-year-old student also plays the flute at school, and takes gymnastics at the local YMCA.

Still, he didn't completely escape the perils of his mother's drug addiction. Nor did she.

Isaiah's eyes have been crossed since birth, which made sitting up and walking more of a challenge early on, and he would fall more often than a typical toddler. He also was born with spina bifida occulta, a spinal cord disorder resulting in sensory delays, so when he did fall, he couldn't feel pain and still doesn't feel it the way most people do. The disorder has made it difficult for his family to know when his injuries are significant. He still has difficulty with fine motor skills and shows little emotion. For the third time, he had eye surgery in November 2012 in hopes of further straightening them. This is only some of what he copes with each day.

His mother didn't fare as well.

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Families: Get ready to apply for 2013-14 scholarships

As the new year rolls in, Step Up For Students is preparing to open up another scholarship application season for the 2013-14 school year, and families interested in the scholarship program should begin preparing now.

Renewal family applications will open in early February, and applications for new families will begin in early March. Step Up For Students will begin automated phone calls and written communications alerting families in January, said Anne White, Step Up's vice president of operations and human resources.

"Because of the success of the program, several thousand students who applied late for the current school year ended up on a waiting list, and some of those children received prorated scholarships in recent months," said White.

The bottom line is, she added, when seeking a scholarship, especially renewal students, applicants should be diligent with the application process, and submit all required documents as soon as possible. In fact, because of the overwhelming interest

for the current year, applications closed earlier than ever before.

"Apply early and apply completely," White said. "If your child is already on the scholarship program, then we want to keep them on the program because it's less disruptive to the student."

Here are some things applicants should know:

Be patient. "With tens of thousands of applicants, that's an astronomical amount of paperwork to sort through. The later you apply, particularly those submitted as late as July, or those that are missing required documents, will likely not be completed until after the start of school," White said.

Communication is key. "Especially during the application and enrollment seasons, Step Up will be busy sending out messages either by letters, postcards, email or phone calls every month," White said. "It's really critical that applicants understand we're doing a lot of outreach. It's very important for people to be responsive because it's the only way we can continue to move applicants through the process. In recent months, we

have begun making automated phone calls that have enabled us to reach many more families, more quickly. We have found this to be the most effective way to communicate, and more families are now sending in their documentation as a result. Also, families have been wonderful about providing us feedback about the application process. We truly appreciate this, as it helps us improve each year, so we can serve you better."

And, she added, make sure all applicant contact information is current.

Questions. For any help regarding scholarship applications, please call the contact center at 877-735-7837. Our contact center is open Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 11 a.m. and noon to 6 p.m. Eastern time.

You may also email questions to info@stepupforstudents.org. For those not already on Step Up's scholarship interest list to be notified when applications open, go to <http://www.stepupforstudents.org/family>.



Look inside for fliers to share with your family and friends who might be able to benefit from the **STEP UP FOR STUDENTS SCHOLARSHIP**

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At age 18, Kristi became entangled in drugs, said her mother, Cheryl. She had grown up with a supportive family and gained a solid educational background, but started running with the wrong crowd, Cheryl said. She married another drug user when she was 25, and had Benjamin that same year.

Cheryl was awarded guardianship of her two grandsons in 2004 after her daughter had been arrested on previous drug charges. Shortly after, Cheryl lost her job managing a chiropractic office in Tampa where she was employed for seven years, she said, because her boss told her she would be out too much with Isaiah's doctor's appointments. She has worked at a much lower paying job without benefits ever since.

By the time Isaiah was 3 and in preschool, administrators and teachers at his neighborhood school were overwhelmed by his physical challenges and ultimately placed him in special education classes, despite his obvious intelligence, Cheryl said.

"His mind's intact," Cheryl would tell school teachers and administrators. "Please don't treat him like he's mentally handicapped."

By first grade, Isaiah was given yet another lifeline by the educators in his family, who founded and still run New Jerusalem Christian Academy in Seffner, just outside of Tampa. His aunt, Dari Valladares, is the principal at New Jerusalem, which was started by her mother, Miriam Gonzalez. Dari first informally tested Isaiah to see if he could follow directions, knew his sounds, letters and numbers and had the ability to write and hold scissors and pencils. While he has a shaky hand when writing or holding scissors because of his lack of hand-eye coordination due to his sensory delay and vision problems, he did well on everything else.

"I didn't want to put him here if he wasn't ready," Dari said.

Cheryl couldn't afford the tuition on her own, but applied and received Step Up scholarships for the boys.

"It was the best thing that has happened," she said. "Financially, things have been a struggle, but the boys are getting what they need."

Both boys seem happy and comfortable at school, but Isaiah especially shines. Dari calls him a social butterfly. His passion is gymnastics, and he smiles when he has a chance to show off his handstand on the playground. The brothers seem to enjoy hamming it up when photographs are snapped.

They also clearly have a special bond with their principal and aunt.

"Academically, he's done phenomenally," Dari said of Isaiah. "He's done phenomenally socially. In the special needs class (at his previous school) he didn't really talk."

Benjamin is doing well in school, but has a difficult time focusing because he has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, one of the most common childhood behavioral disorders, thought to be a result of all he has gone through. He enjoys playing on school sports teams like soccer and volleyball.

Both boys, in fact, take behavioral modification medication, and are benefitting from being in small classrooms and receiving

one-on-one attention, Cheryl said. She's confident they will both succeed in life, but she is especially pleased with Isaiah's transformation so far.

"He's been at the top of his class the whole time," his grandmother says. "The boy is just amazing because he found out he's smart."

About New Jerusalem Christian Academy

Miriam Gonzalez, who with her husband, Elvin, has been pastoring New Jerusalem Church, now called New Jerusalem International Ministries, since 1991. She opened a New Jerusalem Christian Academy on the same property in 1996, where her daughter Dari Valladares now serves as principal. After making the decision to start a school, Gonzalez earned her master's degree in Christian education and said she mostly relied on prayer and donations to open the school, which now serves students preK-2 through middle school. Currently, the school has about 140 students, of which 43 students are Step Up scholars. In addition to standard curriculum, it also offers classes including dance, band and TV production. The school uses the TerraNova assessment test to measure individual academic success. Tuition for the 2012-13 school year is \$4,000 for grades kindergarten through fifth grade and \$4,500 for middle school students.



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

About Step Up For Students:

Step Up For Students provides legislatively authorized K-12 scholarship programs and related support to give economically disadvantaged families the freedom to choose the best learning options for their children.

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