

## CARE Elementary offers Overtown students alternative, private education

By Jeffrey Pierre



CARE Elementary School, located at 2025 NW First Ave., Wednesday June 17, 2015. **WALTER MICHOT** - Miami Herald Staff

Overtown's new faith-based private school has a simple mission: to bridge the reading, literacy and technology gap in under-served communities. Putting everything together by August, however, will be the challenge.

"We still have a ways to go," said Christopher Simmonds, 32, who was hired last year as the CARE Elementary School's principal and director.

Miami Rescue Mission donated the space that will house the nonprofit K-3 school; however, the school is renovating its six classrooms and computer room with new carpeting, paint, smart-boards and flat screen televisions equipped with Apple TV. Each classroom will have 25 iPads.

"Pretty much, you're looking at a facelift to the facility," Simmonds said. "But we're putting everything in place so that these parents can feel comfortable, confident and encouraged."

For Janie Jackson, a single parent raising five boys in Liberty City, the option of sending her child to private school was something financially out of reach.

Like Jackson's 7-year-old son, Joseph, 95 percent of the students who will attend CARE meet the low-income criteria for the National Free and Reduced Lunch program.

Parents sending their children to CARE, however, should not have to pay the school's tuition rate — almost \$8,000, according to Simmonds.

As a part of the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program,

Step Up, an income-based scholarship, will award Jackson — and any family that applies before the scholarship's deadline — \$5,272 annually in quarterly payments. Parents also have the option to apply for aid with a similar program through the AAA Scholarship Foundation.

And what the scholarship don't cover, CARE will pull from its operational budget to pay the rest.

Before the project officially broke ground last year, the school set out to raise a budget of \$600,000.

"We didn't want to have to keep relying on quarterly checks coming in from Step Up," Simmonds said, adding that living check by check would reduce the quality of education. The operational budget gives the school a financial cushion.

CARE has raised 81 percent of its goal so far.

"So we have money coming in from the quarterly checks from Step Up, and money from our operational budget," he said.

Despite the Step Up scholarship's success in school's like CARE, Jon East, vice president of Policy and Public Affairs for Step Up, said there are still many who oppose the program. Since its inception in 2001, the FTC has drawn a lot of criticism from education purists who say private institutions take resources away from public schools.

Last month, a Leon County judge threw out a case — filed by Florida Education Association, the Florida School



Christopher Simmonds, director and principal of CARE Elementary School, shows Janie Jackson the new books her third grade son will be reading in the fall, Wednesday June 17, 2015. **WALTER MICHOT** - Miami Herald Staff

Boards Association and the PTA, to name a few — that questioned the constitutionality of state-run programs like the FTC.

The judge ruled that the FTC isn't funded through taxpayer dollars but through corporations that receive tax credits.

East, said "these programs still remain controversial" in the growing debate between public versus private schooling. The court's ruling, according to East, is anecdotal evidence that opponents are coming around.

"This scholarship works in partnership with traditional public schools," East said. "It's not there to rescue a kid from a failing public school; it's there to provide an option for kids who tend to struggle the most."

Jackson, who has been on her own for 17 years (since her first son, Jordan born), said enrolling Joseph in CARE wasn't because of a "poor public school," but because her son needed extra attention.

"He's an energetic person," Jackson said. "I got some complaints about Joseph, but afterward, everyone would always tell me that they saw something special in him."

CARE's solution for students like Joseph: smaller classrooms.

Each class will have 22 students, a teacher and an aid.

Classroom size is a problem that most schools face, especially in the Overtown area, Simmonds said. In Miami Dade County, just fewer than 18,000 students receive help from Step Up, and most parents have similar complaints.

"You have one teacher dealing with [too many kids]," he said. "Twenty-five kids in one room with one teacher is a lot to manage."

CARE President Marty Steinberger said that as a coordinator for Read on Miami, she found many of Overtown's third grade students were going unnoticed and reading below grade level.

Read on Miami — an after-school program at Miami Rescue Mission — was the spark that led Steinberger to push for CARE in Overtown. "The desire to learn is there," she said, but students still struggle for adequate attention.

"There's just a huge need for better instruction and better intervention," Steinberger said. "We want the kids to have that academic and spiritual foundation that empowers them to be successful."



Christopher Simmonds, director and principal of CARE Elementary School, located at 2025 NW First Ave., looks over a poster in his new office Wednesday June 17, 2015.  
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