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Crist promotes school voucher program

By TRACY-ANN TAYLOR

FORT LAUDERDALE – When Antonio Trigo came close to failing in public school, his grandmother applied for a tax-credit scholarship so he could attend private school.

She enrolled him in Mount Olivet Seventh-Day Adventist School in Fort Lauderdale, where he earned a spot on the honor roll and learned to play the piano. Last year, he was the class valedictorian.

"The Step Up For Students scholarship program and its generous donors have made my success possible," Trigo said on Friday, Oct. 16 at the sixth annual Step Up For Students Donor Appreciation Rally. "I am so grateful for Step Up for Students and its donors and sponsors. You have given me a second chance at success. I will do my best to make you proud."

Wearing T-Shirts that read, "Leveling the Playing Field," Trigo and more than 1,500 students and educators from various schools joined Gov. Charlie Crist and civil rights icon the Rev. H.K. Matthews at the Mount Bethel Christian Academy in Fort Lauderdale.

They thanked their corporate sponsors, Walgreens, LabCorp and Branch Banking & Trust (BB&T) for their donations to Step Up For Students.

"Step Up For Students gives low-income parents the power to do the most important thing: send your child to the school that's best for you. These students will not be limited by income or geography or any other barrier because we believe in education in Florida," said Crist, who is running for the U.S. Senate.

Step Up For Students is the nonprofit group that oversees the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship. The program provides annual private school tuition scholarships and transportation to out-of-district schools for students from households whose income meets federal guidelines for free and reduced-price

lunch.

The scholarship program serves over 24,000 children statewide, including more than 7,500 in Broward and Miami-Dade counties, said Julio Fuentes, the event's master of ceremonies.

In Florida, 45 percent of voucher recipients are African-American. With graduation rates among African Americans below 50 percent, the organization's effort is to transform lives by providing minority children the same quality education as those in high-income brackets.

The Florida Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship Program has been at the center of a heated debate since Florida adopted its first voucher program, which was initiated by then-Gov. Jeb Bush in 1999.

Supporters argue that the corporate tax credit vouchers save money because the vouchers pay less to private schools than taxpayers spend on each student in public schools.

Opponents argue that the program is another financial setback for public education because it reduces school enrollment, and thus reduces the amount of funding that public schools receive. Opponents further argue that public schools must continue to pay for utilities, maintenance and other overhead expenses even when they have fewer students and less money.

But Doug Tuthill, president of Step Up For Students, said the program is a win-win for everyone.

"We educate kids on about fifty cents for every dollar. So, every child that comes into our program actually saves the public school system. Last year, a study showed that we saved the public school system about \$42 million a year," Tuthill said. "The other thing we do is



Antonio Trigo spoke at the rally.

save kids from dropping out of school. You heard the stories today."

Trigo's experience is one of many such success stories. Now a freshman at Miami Union Academy in North Miami, a private school that boasts a graduation rate of 98 percent, Trigo plans to attend college to study pathology.

Matthews, a civil rights icon from Pensacola who marched with Martin Luther King Jr. and was jailed 35 times for his civil-rights protests, agreed that the program provides an equal opportunity for all children to have a quality education, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

"The Step Up For Students Scholarship program allows children to escape the downward spiral that leads them to dropping out and becoming just another statistic," Matthews said. "We need to fight for programs like Step Up For Students which brings opportunity, promise and hope: For many are the children who are lost and need the educational compass to guide them to become responsible and productive members of society."

Tayltra9@Aol.com