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PRIVATE FIRST CLASS: DCA thrives in struggling economy

By Tosha Sketo

The current state of the economy has many families struggling financially due to lost jobs or a reduction in hours — but the loss of income may mean gains for parents in choices for their children's educations.

Although Destin is fortunate to have quality public schools, some kids need the smaller classrooms and one-on-one instruction that private schools can afford to provide. For parents working paycheck-to-paycheck, meeting that need can be a financial impossibility.

The McKay and Step Up for Students scholarship programs give low-income parents the ability to meet the individual needs of their child by offering scholarship funds to families that meet certain qualifications.

“People don't really know these scholarships are available,” said Debbie Robicheaux, the grandmother of two Destin Christian Academy students. “They are out there, it's just a matter of finding them.”

Robicheaux's grandchildren are

recipients of the Step Up for Students scholarship, which provides eligible families with up to \$3,950 for private school tuition and books.

A family of four that makes less than \$40,793 a year and has a child that is either entering Kindergarten or 1st grade or has attended a Florida public school for the entire previous school year is eligible.

“My grandson transferred from public school because he needed a change,” Robicheaux said. “Since he's been at DCA, his whole personality has opened up.”

In addition to the Step Up for Students scholarship, the McKay scholarship is available to provide parents of children with special needs the ability to send them to a private school.

“We currently have two children on McKay scholarships and eight on Step Up for Students scholarships,” said Dean Demara, Principal of Destin Christian Academy. “I've been trying to get the word out to help lower-income people.”

Robicheaux said private school is

a better atmosphere for her grandchildren because the smaller classes enable a more tight-knit connection between students and teachers and more one-on-one instruction.

According to Demara, enrollment at DCA is up 10 percent this year, in part, because more people can qualify for scholarships due to the state of the economy. He said another by-product of the economy is that there are more teachers on the market, enabling him to hire better educators.

While enrollment is up at DCA, the school maintains its small, private school atmosphere. The largest class at DCA has only 11 children.

“You can see and feel the difference since they've made the change,” Robicheaux said. “The basic process of applying for the scholarship is easy as long as you know it's there and get started early.”

For more information on the Step Up for Students and McKay scholarship programs, visit www.stepupforstudents.org and www.floridaschoolchoice.org.