

Monday, January 13, 2014

Florida family 'blessed' to be apart of scholarship program



STEPPING UP FOR STUDENTS: Benjamin, right, and Isaiah Vargas are benefiting from educational scholarships.

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Watchdog.org

Cheryl Valladares knew she had to do something. Her grandchild, Benjamin Vargas, was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and quickly was falling behind in a public school.

"They were a babysitter more or less," said Valladares when describing Benjamin's school experience. "He was getting left behind because of a large class size, despite being a smart kid."

So, she said she decided to take action by applying for an education scholarship program that would allow her to find a school that better fit the child's needs.

In 2001, the Florida Legislature passed the Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship Program, which provides financial

assistance to low-income families with children between kindergarten and 12th grade. Since then, more than 331,000 students have received scholarships from Step Up for Students, a nonprofit organization that administers the program.

Valladares was able to use that money to find a private school near their home in Brandon, Fla., for both Benjamin and his younger brother Isaiah.

Valladares said it didn't take long for her to notice the difference. Benjamin's reading, English and handwriting skills quickly improved.

"Reading was always hard for Benjamin because he didn't retain the knowledge," Valladares said.

But he soon got the help he needed in a smaller, more personalized classroom environment.

Isaiah, who is two years younger than Benjamin, also has ADHD as well as vision issues. Teachers have worked with him to improve his ability to learn and focus.

Both Benjamin and Isaiah now are honor roll students, with the ability to play several musical instruments.

"I now have two completely different boys," Valladares said. "I feel so blessed because I felt they would have been lost in the public school system. I have nothing against public schools. They just didn't have what we needed."

Valladares and her grandchildren, however, are far from alone in this experience. Families across the Florida increasingly are using the scholarship program in one of 1,500 participating schools.

More than 60,000 students are being served in the program, according to data from Step Up for Students. That number

is expected to jump to more than 100,000 by the 2017-2018 school year.

The program is capped at \$286 million for this school year, granting each student a scholarship of nearly \$4,900.

The program also is helping taxpayers. According to the state's Official Revenue Estimating Conference, the voucher system saved the state nearly \$58 million between 2012 and 2013, and nearly \$200 million during the past four years. A maximum scholarship in the 2012-2013 school year represented only 68 percent of the state's average cost per public student.

"This program takes the poorest of the poor and allows the parents to place them in an environment that works best for their child at a significantly lower cost for their education," said Wendy Howard, director of the nonprofit Florida Alliance for Choices in Education. "When these children succeed in their environment, they become productive tax-paying citizens later in life."

But for Valladares, school choice is more than just a leg up.

"I believe it gives your child a chance to individualize and gain perspective of their abilities. It allows them to be themselves and encourages the pursuit of goals in life," she said.