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Gov. Crist Celebrates Corporate Contributions for Low-Income Scholarships in Florida
One high school junior shares her inspiring story

JACKSONVILLE, Fla., Nov. 10, 2008 — Denisha Merriweather is but one of the 22,000 students who are receiving K-12 scholarships in Florida this year, but that makes her story no less compelling. The progress she has made as a junior at Esprit de Corps Center for Learning in Jacksonville left even Gov. Charlie Crist amazed at a rally held here on Monday to celebrate the seventh year of low-income scholarships in the state.

“Denisha is a young woman who has found a new spark in her life,” Crist said. “She has turned around her school career because she found a school that connected with her. God bless her.”

Denisha has received a Step Up For Students Scholarship for five years, and she stood before the governor, local dignitaries, corporate donors and more than 600 parental choice supporters at The Potter’s House Christian Academy in Jacksonville to tell her story. The program, also known as Corporate Tax Credit Scholarships, provides annual tuition scholarships of up to \$3,950 or transportation scholarships of up to \$500 to out-of-district public schools for students whose families meet the federal guidelines for free and reduced lunch. In its first six years, the program has been fueled by more than \$400-million in corporate contributions and three companies – Walgreens, PSS World Medical and Fidelity National Financial – were singled out Monday for their own commitment to low-income students.

“Our contributions over the past three years have provided scholarships for more than 6,500 children throughout Florida, giving them the opportunity to receive the education they deserve,” said Debra Garza, Divisional Vice President of Government and Community Relations for Walgreens. “It’s only right that we give back to those families who make our community *strong* – because our companies couldn’t exist without them.”

Denisha told those in attendance that, before receiving the scholarship, she failed third grade twice, missed school repeatedly, recorded D's and F's in her classes, and found herself in conflicts and physical fights with other students. Now, she is an honor roll student with a 3.8 GPA who is an active volunteer for the Police Athletic League and the statewide vice president of the Youth Directors Council in Florida. She is looking toward college and a career as a geneticist.

"The last five years have completely changed my life," Denisha said. "If it weren't for the scholarship program, I might have been one more student who drops out of school and just another statistic. ... My school ended up being a perfect fit for me. It was the first time in my life that I actually believed in myself."

The scholarship program has gained in political popularity each year, with a strong bipartisan majority in the Legislature voting in May to expand its reach to more than 25,000 students a year. The program provides educational options for economically disadvantaged students, and the average household income for a family of four last year was \$24,489. These same families paid, on average, \$1,000 out of their own pockets to make up the difference between the scholarship and the full cost of the private tuition. Gov. Crist, who signed the expansion bill this year, called the scholarships "an example of what we need to do to adapt public education to a new century."

"We are no longer just competing with other states in this great nation, but with other countries as well," said Governor Crist. "Step Up For Students Scholarships are helping us to diversify our education system to achieve greater results and provide our children and future workforce with a world-class education."

Gov. Crist was joined in his praise by retired Duval Sheriff Nathaniel Glover Jr. and former State Rep. Terry Fields. Sheriff Glover, a police officer for more than 35 years and the first African-American sheriff in Florida in more than 100 years, was the featured speaker. Glover said he is a strong believer that the most effective tool in combating crime is education, and he dedicates his time these days to encouraging students to stay in school and pursue higher education.

"The reality of what our youth face today is devastating," Glover said. "Just last year, more than 4,100 Duval County youth were charged with delinquent crimes and 18 percent of those were charged with committing violent felony offenses. The link missing for many of these children is the proper education."

The rally, called "More Choices, Better Futures," is held each year to recognize the vital role that corporations play in the program. Walgreens itself has contributed \$26-million to the Step Up For Students Scholarships since 2006. Fidelity presented a check for \$2.3-million and PSS World a check for \$1-million.

"The scholarship program opened the door for us to provide financial resources that would benefit Florida's most valuable asset — our children," said Richard Cox, Senior Vice President-Chief Tax Officer for Fidelity

National Financial, Fidelity National Information Services and Lender Processing Services. “Our donation today of \$2.3-million is an investment in Florida’s future, and it is a great opportunity for Fidelity to impact the lives of thousands of children.”

“At PSS World Medical, we are dedicated to improving healthcare in America through innovative solutions. And now, with our partnership with Step Up For Students, we have found an innovative way to help improve education for all of Florida’s students,” said Andrew Behrends, Vice President and Corporate Controller for PSS World Medical, Inc. “We are excited to be a part of this program and look forward to seeing the great outcomes of this partnership.”

Representatives from the event sponsors Walgreens, Florida Lottery, Winn-Dixie, Lowe’s, Mercantile Bank, SDE, Bealls Inc., and Dunkin Donuts were also honored at the event.

About The Potter’s House Christian Academy

The Potter’s House Christian Academy was co-founded in 1996 by Bishop Vaughn McLaughlin and his wife, Lady Narlene McLaughlin. It is home to about 550 students in PreK-12 and already has achieved a remarkable record of educational success, including a phenomenal graduation rate of 99 percent. The annual tuition is \$3,200 in grades K-4, \$3,900 in 5-6 and \$4,000 in 7-12. The school annually administers the Stanford Achievement Test. This year, Potter’s House has about 170 Step Up For Students Scholarship students. Of the scholarships, Lady McLaughlin says: “This program unifies us as a community and gives the Potter’s House the opportunity to make a positive difference in the lives of our children.”

About Step Up For Students

The Florida Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship Program – also known as Step Up For Students – currently provides K-12 scholarships for more than 22,000 low-income Florida students to attend a private school or out-of-district public school. Step Up For Students scholarships are funded by corporations that redirect up to 75 percent of their corporate state tax liability to a qualified Scholarship Funding Organization in exchange for a dollar-for-dollar tax credit. For more information, visit www.stepupforstudents.com

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