

School Reform News

Florida Lawmakers Applaud Donors to 'Step Up for Students' Program

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Florida Gov. Charlie Crist greeted Marquita Forsett and her twin boys, Micah and Justice Chisvano, at the "Building Futures, Bridging Gaps" Rally on December 10 at Miami Union Academy

Florida Gov. Charlie Crist (R), state Rep. Ronald Brisé (D-North Miami), and former U.S. Rep. Carrie Meek were just a few of the dignitaries who came together on December 10 to thank corporate sponsors for their donations to fund K-12 scholarships for low-income families at the "Building Futures, Bridging Gaps" rally at Miami Union Academy.

The fourth annual Step Up For Students Donor Appreciation Rally was held in South Florida, where more than 4,500 children are currently attending schools of their parents' choice on Step Up For Students Scholarships.

More than 500 attendees celebrated the past six years of scholarship success by thanking donors such as Wachovia, CVS Caremark, and Waste Management. The generosity of national corporations serves more than 20,000 children statewide, 45 percent of whom are African-American.

New Century

Crist commended the corporations that have made the program a success and whose donations have empowered thousands of disadvantaged parents to find the schools that best suit their children's educational needs.

"These scholarships are an example of how we can adapt public education to a new century," Crist said. "Step Up For Students is one way that we are diversifying our approach to public education and school choice initiatives. Giving parents the ability to choose the education that best meets their child's learning

needs means that all students are given access to the world-class education Florida has to offer."

Step Up For Students presented Meek with an appreciation banner as a thank-you gift for supporting education options.

The Carrie Meek Foundation partners with Step Up For Students in distributing K-12 scholarships to economically disadvantaged students in north Miami-Dade County.

"It is such an honor to be here today in the presence of all of these young, talented students who aspire to do great things with their lives," Meek said. "The Carrie Meek Foundation believes in providing a quality education for all of Florida's children, regardless of their socioeconomic status."

Success Story

The festivities included a personal story from Melody Cherfils, a Miami Union Academy graduate and former Step Up For Students Scholarship recipient.

Before receiving the scholarship, Cherfils said, she had less than a 1.0 grade point average and was considering dropping out of her assigned public school.

Miami Union Academy successfully graduates 98 percent of its students, and 90 percent go to college. Cherfils graduated in 2006 and now attends Oakwood College in Huntsville, Alabama.

"The generous donors have given me a second chance at an excellent education and more importantly, a future," Cherfils said. "Due to my academic struggles, I never imagined graduating high school, let alone pursuing college. The scholarship allowed me to find a school that met my educational needs and helped me realize my full potential."

Donors Old and New

Some donors, including Wachovia, have been a part of the corporate scholarship program since its inception. Wachovia has donated \$12.5 million over the past six years.

"Florida's children deserve a quality education, and Wachovia is pleased to contribute to a program that helps children succeed,"

said Jorge Gonzalez, the company's regional president for Miami-Dade, Monroe, and Broward Counties.

During the event, executives from CVS Caremark and Waste Management, Inc. announced their companies have signed on as Step Up For Students' newest corporate donors.

"As a corporate custodian, it is our responsibility to address the needs of our communities, including the education of our youth," said Jeff Sabin, Waste Management, Inc.'s government affairs manager. "Waste Management has a strong commitment to making a positive difference in our environment and our communities."

Ongoing Support

Brisé--who served as the rally's master of ceremonies--is vice president of the state legislature's Black Caucus, where he continuously pledges his support for the scholarship program in order to represent his constituents' best interests.

"Parental choice is a bold and powerful idea that I will continue to support," Brisé said. "I am here today to celebrate the generous donations from corporations and illustrate the bipartisan support of the Step Up For Students Scholarship Program."

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