



Darian Pena
Cutler Ridge Christian Academy
MIAMI, FL

Darian Pena has seen success this year, just one year after leaving a Miami charter school his mother believed had given up on him.

His classes at Cutler Ridge Christian Academy are smaller, the teachers more nurturing. He has the individual attention that had long been lacking in his previous school, and his behavior has improved dramatically, says his mother, Kimberly McGregor.

But that achievement came after several years of setbacks.

Kimberly never thought she had a “choice” when her son was entering kindergarten. She wasn’t happy with the performance of her neighborhood schools in Miami, so she enrolled Darian in a charter school known for immersing students in other languages.

But as the school taught math and science in Spanish, Darian would act up to avoid any embarrassment of not knowing the language, Kimberly says. And his behavioral issues only increased after his parents separated.

“As a result, he was bringing home Ds and Fs, which is unacceptable in my household,” Kimberly says.

While Darian was struggling, Kimberly says she endured as much frustration trying to get the attention of the teachers and administrators at the school. By the end of his third-grade year, Kimberly felt as though the faculty there had given up on Darian. That was about the time she heard about the Step Up For Students Scholarship Program, which enabled her to pick a school she never thought was possible to afford, Cutler Ridge Christian Academy.

Soon after starting his fourth-grade year at Cutler Ridge, Darian showed progress in every subject. His behavior improved, and Kimberly found his teachers responsive to her questions. She said she was so inspired that she became active in the Parent Advisory Council for the first time in Darian’s education.

But as a single mother with two children and earning less than \$29,000 a year, Kimberly struggled to cover the tuition and fees at Cutler Ridge that the Step Up scholarship could not cover. Darian watched as one of his classmates had to leave the school because his mother could not cover the same gap. Just when she thought she’d have to remove Darian as well, an anonymous donor helped her pay those out-of-pocket costs.

“Now, doors have opened up and possibilities are endless for my son,” she says.

She was so moved by the assistance that she traveled to Tallahassee in March to urge state senators to pass a bill that expanded the Step Up For Students Scholarship and reduced the out-of-pocket costs for families like hers to cover tuition and fees at their chosen schools. She told them she had a “cause to be passionate about.”

In the end, the Legislature passed Senate Bill 2126. Afterward, Kimberly said, “I felt my meager words had made a difference.”

About Cutler Ridge Christian Academy

Cutler Ridge Christian Academy in Miami opened in 1972 and now serves 197 students from kindergarten to 12th grade. It is known for its family-oriented approach and strong spiritual component to learning. It also has a strong science program and pre-Advanced Placement courses, and the students take the Stanford Achievement Test as a way to gauge their progress. The tuition and fees range from \$5,250 to \$5,840, and school served 50 scholarship students in 2009-10.