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Step Up for Students rallied to protect state-funded program

By Kaila Heard

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More than 500 residents from South Florida joined parents, students and teachers from across Florida to urge legislatures to protect Florida's school voucher program last Thursday.

Marquita Forsett, a resident of Overtown and mother of four, traveled overnight by bus to attend the rally in Tallahassee. "This is America and we do have freedom of choice for where we want to put your kids," said Forsett. "I just choose a better life for me and my kids."

The programs in question, the Corporate Tax Credit (CTC) Please turn to **PROGRAM 14B**



Step Up for Students rally to protect Florida's school waiver scholarship programs.

Program rallies to bring awareness to legislators

PROGRAM
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Scholarship and the McKay Scholarship, offer qualifying low-income families scholarships for children in grades in K-12 for the private or public school of the parents choosing. Forsett decided to use the CTC program to move her 10-year old twins from a public school in Overtown into a private school. A decision she does not regret. "My twins were struggling in public school," she said. Although Forsett believes in public schools, she feels the right decision was made for her children. "Education is the key to unlocking any door that isn't open," said Forsett.

The Florida Corporate Tax Credit Scholarship provides students with up to \$3,750 in financial assistance. The McKay Scholarship is geared toward low-income students with disabilities and offers scholarships on average of \$6,927. "This program helps to match up children with the right environment," said John Kirtley, president of Florida Alliance for Choices in Education.

Step Up For Students, an initiative of Florida Corporate Tax Credit (CTC) Scholarship Program, rallies every year to bring awareness of the programs to the attention of state and federal legislators. The rally featured Governor

Charlie Crist, Redemptive Life's senior pastor Harold Ray and civil rights leader, Reverend H.K. Matthews.

This year, the rally focused on the need for legislators to strengthen and protect the program. Currently, there are two pending legislative bills that could fortify the program. Jillian Metz, communication specialist for Step Up For Students, explained the need for more protection. "Our fear is a potential lawsuit that will take away the scholarship," she said.

The genuine fear for school voucher advocates came after Florida's other school waiver program, Opportunity scholarships, was unsuccessful.

The former program, which allowed students in failing schools to transfer to a better-performing public or private school, was deemed unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court in 2006. Now students from failing public schools may only transfer to another public school.

Yet for the 2005-2006 school year, the McKay scholarship provided aid for 17,300 low-income students, while CTC provided for 13,497. "I believe the challenge facing children these days are so great," said Kirtley. "Our children are in need and look for us continue to offer educational choice' scholarships."