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Businesses invest in kids' school success statewide

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Denisha Merriweather said she was headed down the path of a school dropout and a statistic. She was held back twice by the time she was in the third grade and failed all of her third-grade subjects.

A corporate-sponsored scholarship to attend a private school helped turn her life around, the 17-year-old told Gov. Charlie Crist and an audience of 600 on Monday at Potter's House Christian Academy in Jacksonville.

Now an honor student at Esprit de Corps Center For Learning in Jacksonville, Merriweather received Florida's Step Up For Students scholarship in 2004.

The scholarships are awarded to low-income students who meet federal guidelines for the national free- or reduced-cost lunch program to attend private schools. The program accepts applications throughout the year.

Crist joined parents, students and educators at Potter's House to thank the corporate donors who make the Step Up scholarships possible. More than 100 businesses helped fund the program's \$118 million budget for 2008.

Representatives for Walgreens, PSS World Medical and Fidelity National Financial were in attendance. Walgreens donated \$9 million to the program this

year; PSS World Medical gave \$1 million and Fidelity, \$2 million. The donors 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.

Merriweather, now a junior, is one of 22,000 K-12 students in Florida and 2,500 in Duval County on a Step Up scholarship.

"The Step Up For Students scholarship gave me a second chance for a better future," Merriweather said. "The teachers worked on me one-on-one and by the end of the first semester my grades had risen from D's and F's to A's and B's. That first year I made A/B honor roll for the first time ever."

The crowd gave Merriweather a standing ovation when she told them she now has a 3.8 grade-point average and wants to attend college to study genetics.

Crist said the scholarship program is a model for the country for what collaboration and cooperation between government and businesses can accomplish.

"When we work together with our friends in the private sector," Crist said, "those of us in the public sector can do a lot of good for a lot of young people in Florida."

La Norra Dennis teaches fifth grade at Potter's House and has six children who attend the school on Step Up scholarships.

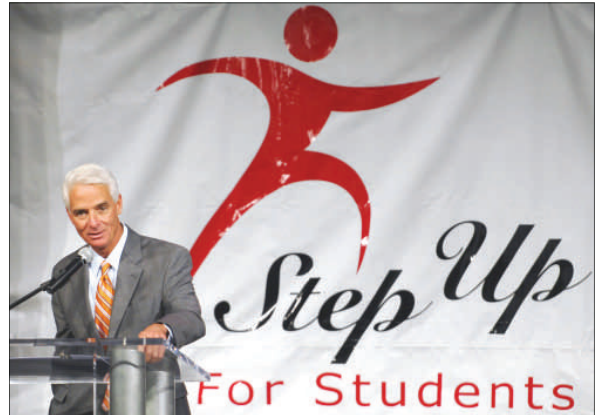
"There is no way as a single parent I would ever be able to afford to send

them to a private school," she said.

Dennis' 14-year-old son, Erick, is a ninth-grader at Potter's House. Dennis said her son's attitude and grades have greatly improved since coming to Potter's House in 2004, when he was in the fifth grade.

Erick agrees.

"It's a lot better than the public school that I went to before," he said. "My teachers, when I'm slacking off, they don't give up; they care. They call parents and let them know what I'm not doing. They buckle down a little bit more."



Gov. Crist called the program a model in the country for cooperation between government and business.



Students applaud as the Step Up For Students scholarship program is presented with a check for \$26-million from Walgreens.



Gov. Crist greets student Denisha Merriweather during his visit to Potter's House Christian Fellowship.