



SPREADING THE NEWS

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Parental choice advocate pledges support to Hillsborough migrant charter academy

TAMPA, Fla. — An acclaimed charter school that serves the children of migrant and farm-working families in Hillsborough County got a \$200,000 boost today from a Tampa businessman with a history of helping low-income students in Florida.

The pledge to the RCMA Wimauma Academy comes from John Kirtley, who is chairman of an organization that administers the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship for low-income K-12 students, and is aimed at helping the nine-year-old school build new classroom facilities to expand its reach to struggling farm children. He is providing his own \$100,000 to be matched by the Walton Family Foundation. He also has committed to help the academy's \$1.6 million capital campaign tap into the state and national network of parental choice organizations of which Kirtley is a key participant.

"This school is a perfect example of how the distinctions of 'public' and 'private' are increasingly meaningless," Kirtley said. "Just as in our tax credit scholarship program, here you have a non-profit organization providing a customized education that low-income parents freely choose as the best for their children."

The charter academy, run by the Immokalee-based migrant association, currently serves 194 mostly Hispanic immigrant students in grades K-5 in a set of modular classrooms that are bursting at their seams. It is rated A by the state's school grading system even as it serves students who face enormous educational obstacles stemming from their agricultural lifestyle. The academic success is owed in part to a holistic approach that follows the rhythms of the farm community, staying open later, working directly with families, tailoring transportation to schools. The director recently described the approach to a newspaper reporter this way: "What we're all about is the extra."

With the contributions from Kirtley and the Walton Foundation, the school is more than halfway to its \$1.6 million fundraising goal, which would build a six-classroom facility for middle school students that includes a multipurpose cafeteria, media center and administrative offices. While the school had already raised \$600,000, the souring economy had slowed much of its fundraising efforts. Maria Jimenez, RCMA's charter school director, said that Kirtley's pledge "jumpstarts" the effort.

"We never took our eye off the prize," Jimenez said, "But sometimes the kids we work with are invisible to others. We are thrilled that Mr. Kirtley and the Walton Foundation believe in what we do. This affirmation will keep us going, and it's going to make us work harder and smarter."

The Redlands Christian Migrant Association has reached out to farm-working families for more than four decades and today provides child care and early education to thousands of children in 21 Florida counties. In addition to its school in Wimauma, the association operates a charter academy in Immokalee. The children come from families whose annual household income averages about \$10,000. The curriculum at both schools is tailored to each community's most at-risk students. The longer the students remain in the program, the better their academic performance. That's why adding

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the additional grades is critical, Jimenez said.

Hillsborough schools superintendent MaryEllen Elia, who approves and oversees charter schools in the county, applauded Kirtley's "generosity and vision" in helping RCMA in its mission.

"John Kirtley has recognized that this capital campaign is tremendously important for RCMA Wimauma," Elia said. "This is an A-rated school serving some of our most economically disadvantaged students. The children will benefit greatly from our partnership."

About Redlands Christian Migrant Association

Founded in 1965, RCMA today provides child care and education to 8,000 children of migrant farm workers and other rural, low-income families in 21 Florida counties. It operates two charter schools, in Wimauma and Immokalee. The Wimauma Academy, which received an A on the state's academic report card, is housed in 11 portable classrooms serving 188 children from pre-kindergarten to fifth grade with 15 teachers and a staff of 30. It plans to add grades 6, 7 and 8 with the help of a \$1.6 million fundraising campaign.

About John Kirtley and Step Up For Students

In 1998, Tampa venture capitalist John Kirtley created the Children's Scholarship Fund of Tampa Bay to provide privately funded scholarships for low-income children to attend the K-8 school of their choice. With little publicity, the Fund received 12,500 applications for 700 slots. By 2001, Florida lawmakers responded by creating a statewide program now known as Step Up For students. Today, the Step Up For Students Scholarship enables more than 27,000 students statewide to attend the public or private school of their parents' choice. These scholarships are funded by corporations that redirect up to 75 percent of their corporate state income tax or insurance premium tax liability to a qualified scholarship funding organization in exchange for a dollar-for-dollar tax credit.

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