

Extra credit for St. Thomas, St. Gabriel schools

A tax break-built partnership between a gas company and scholarship program is funneling funds into tuition-based schools.

By Bill Chenevert



Photo by Richard Barnes

State Rep. Jordan Harris visited more than a dozen classrooms between St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Gabriel schools to see who benefits from the state's Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credits (OSTC) program.

The Opportunity Scholarship Tax Credit (OSTC) is helping businesses to dump hundreds of thousands of dollars into the lives of students and families who crave more educational choices. With a struggling Philadelphia School District, the Harrisburg-approved program (approved and enacted in 2012) provides tax credits for corporate contributions to scholarship organizations. With the help of the Children's Scholarship Fund of Philadelphia (CSFP), UGI Energy Services visited two South Philly schools to present a check for \$28,000, the final installment in a series of corporate donations (that total up to \$800,000) to grant low-income students and their families more educational choice.

"This is more than just a tax credit. This is more than just a check to smile at," state Sen. Anthony Williams said in the brand new library at St. Thomas Aquinas School, 1719 Morris St. The school, formerly managed by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Philadelphia, is no longer managed by the entity and is classified as an Independence Mission School. And principal Vince Mazzio, new to the school, has been aggressively building the school back up to its once and former prime.

"We ended last school year with 235 kids, and we are standing today at 272, so we've definitely been growing over the past year," Mazzio said. "We're looking to build upon that and by the start of the next school year, we should be close to 350 kids."

The capacity is 500, he noted, and the school has been growing with its newest and youngest students.

Some of the school's growth could be a direct result of a few partnerships, especially one with the CSFP. When UGI and CSFP representatives toured St. Thomas and St. Gabriel School, 2917 Dickinson St., and another Independence Mission School, Monday, the tours were led by eager student representatives. One of them at St. Gabriel's was Tyler McNabb, an eighth grader and a resident of the 2600 block of Catharine Street. He is a CSFP recipient and receives up to \$3,000 towards his parochial school education.

The CSFP scholarships go to tuition-based schools and are geared toward the lowest-income families, aiming at building a commitment to early education that lasts well into adulthood. And one of the cool things about CSFP is that it's based on a lottery, and if a family has up to three children who could benefit from scholarships, they'll all receive a tuition break.

“Our average child receives \$1,900 a year and for a family of three, it’s \$5,700 a year per family,” CSFP executive director Ina Lipman explained.

But as she noted, their program really engages the family in the entire process, from applying to readying scholarship recipients for high school.

“All of our families have a co-pay [of \$500] so that everyone’s a stakeholder and that has helped our outcomes because it prioritizes education in these families and the kids get it, and they try because they see their parents taking a second job or doing what it takes to provide,” Lipman elaborated.

The average family income for scholarship recipients is \$29,000.

And the results are strong. According to a fund fact sheet: “CSFP has awarded over 16,500 scholarships chosen from over 135,000 applications over the last thirteen years” and “CSFP alumni, who leave our program in 8th grade, are graduating high school on time at rates greater than 96% and over 85% go onto college or post-secondary education within one year of graduation. This compares to an average on-time Philadelphia public high school graduation rate of less than 60%.”

186th district state Rep. Jordan Harris joined state Sen. Williams in visiting a fifth-grade classroom at St. Gabriel’s and addressed a rapt and engaged classroom, an accomplishment after two weeks of holiday vacation. He said he has been “writing laws on a state level,” particularly “a law that allows for big companies [like UGI] to use their money as they see fit and they gave money to this school.” He asked if there were students in the classroom whose families fall into his delegation and indeed there were: 31st and Reed streets, 29th and Dickinson street and 18th and Federal, among others. When asked what they wanted to be when they grew up, they cited a mix of goals: dancer, basketball player, doctor, nurse and veterinarian among them.

Tashan Thornton, a resident of the 1200 block of South 17th Street and an eighth grader with his sites set on attending Ss. Neumann-Goretti High School, 1736 S. 10th St., led the tour of St. Thomas with his sister Tionne, a sixth-grader whose favorite subject is social studies. Thornton said he wanted to be an engineer at Google, and the touring crew gasped at pointed and specific ambition.

When asked about how education fits into UGI’s vision, Alisa Harris, Vice President, Government and Public Affairs, was enthusiastic about its place in UGI’s corporate giving ethos. “Education, enrichment, workforce development, these are extremely important to our corporation and this is just a natural fit to support through OSTC and other programs,” she said. “I always say it’s part of our DNA. Education should be a choice for families and every child, as a mother of two, has different needs. Regardless of if it’s public or parochial or charter school, I think it really boils down to what that particular family or child needs.”

Sister Noreen James, St. Gabriel’s principal, said “we have a good number of single-parent families.” She cited drugs, alcohol and suicide as neighborhood ills.

“When they’re here, they know they’re loved,” she said and noted charter schools are not good for parochial schools, a notion that wasn’t hers only on our tour, but she pointed towards the Independence School’s management in King of Prussia.

“They’re really running it like a business – you can only spend what you bring in. We let our hearts run it, instead of our heads,” James said of the insufficient Archdiocesan oversight.

Michelle Sumner’s kindergarten class at St. Gabriel’s was full of school pride and eagerness to engage a visiting audience.

“Without you guys, [these students] would have nothing. You’re saints. Without you they’d be at public schools not getting serviced,” the resident of the 1200 block of Durfor Street said and remarked that after 36 years of service, “we believe in our product and we’re really committed to our kids.”

http://www.southphillyreview.com/news/features/Extra_credit_for_our_schools-287923611.html