

Scholarship, Kingdom Academy spurred turnaround for Miami student

BY JEFF BARLIS ON JUNE 23, 2017



Henezy Berrios

Eleven-year-old Henezy Berrios' sparkling brown eyes crinkle in the corners when she smiles, which is just about all the time. She has boundless, contagious enthusiasm. She loves to dance and crack jokes.

She's the girl that everyone in school likes. But you would have hardly recognized her in first grade at her neighborhood school in Miami. She was quiet and withdrawn, afraid to ask for help, made fun of because she couldn't read.

The D's and F's and diagnoses of ADHD and dyslexia set off alarms for her mother, Liliana Arguello. She resolved to find a better fit for Henezy's education, and thanks to a Step Up For Students scholarship was able to access a private school called Kingdom Academy. There, her daughter's fears faded as her reading skills blossomed. A different Henezy emerged.

"Her self esteem and attitude has completely changed," Liliana said. "I was going crazy. You need reading for everything, and I was already seeing her frustration. I said this is not going to happen."

Liliana was 15 when she got pregnant with Henezy. Now in her mid-20s, she's a single mother of two who works two or three housekeeping jobs every day. The remaining tuition after the scholarship and other school expenses take much of her paycheck, sometimes leaving little money for food.

Stress is a persistent companion, and Liliana rarely has the time, energy or resources to be as engaged a parent as she would like. That made it all the more important to find the right school.

When Henezy stumbled in her neighborhood school, Liliana found a tutor she could barely afford who told her about the Step Up For Students scholarship. It empowers low-income families to choose from more than 1,700 private schools statewide.

Liliana applied and received a list of 10 schools near her home. In between jobs and on breaks she visited all 10, took tours and asked lots of questions before picking Kingdom Academy.

Sitting on a little lot ringed by oaks and palms, the academy building is small and filled to capacity. It's also clean and well-lit, full of Smartboards, laptops and dedicated teachers. Including before- and after-care, Henezy is at school from 7 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. and can eat three meals a day there. "It's a blessing," Liliana said.

Henezy repeated first grade at Kingdom Academy and was still below grade level in reading throughout her first year. She needed help with unfamiliar words and lacked confidence when reading aloud. But she never got down or gave up.

“We saw her effort,” said principal Elena Navarro. “She’s a very determined girl. It’s wonderful. You could see that maybe she just wasn’t being worked with before.”

By the end of her first year, Henezy was a B student overall with a C in reading. She was improving all around and letting her personality bubble forth. She worked well in small groups and connected with teachers who helped her stay focused with interactive, non-traditional lessons. They let her set a fast pace and move around instead of sitting all day.



Today Henezy Berrios is a bright fourth-grader with a growing aptitude and appreciation for reading.

“(My teacher) helps a lot,” said Henezy, now in fourth grade.

“Sometimes she gives me extra time to do stuff. ... Sometimes she puts on a song about it. Sometimes she teaches it to us in a funny way.”

Eventually, the new school’s approach clicked. Henezy began to love the books that were once a chore.

“I used to feel like I couldn’t do it,” she said. “I couldn’t read the words, so I was like, ‘Oh my god, what is it?!’ Now I feel like these books are amazing and I always should have read them.”

Henezy’s gains this year are stunning.

Kingdom Academy tracks student scores on the standardized Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) test. Step Up For Students’ Office of Student Learning is supporting Kingdom Acad-

emy and a number of participating private schools to analyze MAP data to improve instruction. (Step Up For Students also publishes this blog.)

At the beginning of the year, Henezy was just below the nationwide average in reading. In December, her mid-year results showed gains that were greater than 99 percent of fourth-graders who took the test nationwide.

“I was freaking out,” said Henezy’s fourth-grade teacher, Jessica Gonzalez. “I was trying to figure out if I wrote it down wrong the first time. I had to double check everything. I even went to her teacher last year and showed her the jump. It was a huge deal for me. For her, too, obviously. Her smile just blew up when I showed her.”

Liliana cried, but that’s not uncommon these days with all of Henezy’s growth. Henezy talks often about her goals in life – a huge house, a farm, a car. She wants to buy her mom a house and a car, too.

“She’s amazing,” Liliana said. “She’s the one who motivates me and keeps me going.”

“I am so relieved to know that my child is going to have a successful life, go to college and do big things, whatever she wants to do. She’s not going to have to struggle.”

About Kingdom Academy

Founded in Miami in 1990, the non-denominational Christian school offers an emphasis on business and financial literacy. It holds family workshops to help parents understand the curriculum and improve their own financial literacy skills, and offers Rosetta Stone to those trying to learn English. The school is accredited by AdvancED and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) among others. It serves 250 students from grades K-8, including 175 on the Step Up scholarship. Elementary grades use Pearson Scott Foresman curriculum materials for core subjects, while middle school classes are aligned to local, state and national standards with an eye on career or post-secondary options. The school administers the Measurement of Academic Progress (MAP) as its standardized test three times a year. Tuition is \$7,560 for K-8.