

Inside . . .

**Meet Six Florida Students  
Learning in Diverse Ways**



*Charly Santagado*



*R.J. Wood*



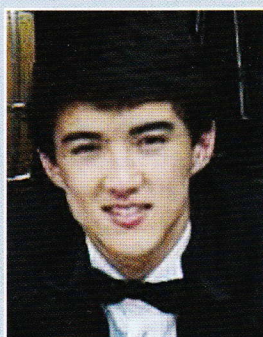
*Luis Aponte, Jr.*



*Willow Tufano*



*Emily Wainio-Oato*



*Ian Maser*

## Expanding Students' Learning Options

*Why Florida Students Need Greater Access to  
Digital, Charter, and Private Schools (and to  
Every Blended Combination in Between)*

**WILLIAM MATTOX**

*Resident Fellow,  
The James Madison Institute*

Imagine that you're seated in the bleachers watching your favorite football team try to stage a furious comeback against a relentless opponent. At a critical moment late in the game, you're absolutely convinced that your team's head coach ought to call a running play to get a first down. Yet, inexplicably, the quarterback drops back to pass instead. You exclaim, "What in the world is he doing?" Then, the quarterback completes the pass. For a touchdown. To win the game.

Now, if you're a true fan of the team, you cheer deliriously — and admit that you're glad the head coach had a better plan than yours. But if you're a union official, watching Florida students fighting to overcome a long classroom battle against mediocrity and failure, you go away grouching that the Governor didn't run the plays you wanted him to run. Even though the students you supposedly root for just experienced remarkable success.

## A Turnaround Decade

In many ways, this tale captures Florida's education story over the last decade. Our state, which once trailed most other states according to various measures of student achievement, staged an incredible turnaround in the first decade of the 21st Century (yet you'd hardly know it from listening to many grouchers and complainers).

Florida's turnaround not only propelled the Sunshine State to the top tier in most national rankings of student success, but it put Florida students on the world map as well. When a 2012 study compared the reading scores of Florida's fourth

graders with their peers in 52 educational systems around the world, the Sunshine State's students scored well above the world average. In fact, Florida students joined those in Finland, Singapore, Russia, and Hong Kong at the very top of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) rankings, outpacing students in 48 other countries.

Importantly, Florida's low-income and minority students outscored the international average on the PIRLS test. This continued a pattern that has been found repeatedly in recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores for Florida. Indeed, Arizona researcher Matt Ladner has been barnstorming the country in recent years, showing education leaders around the nation that average NAEP scores for minority students in Florida now exceed average scores for all students in many states.

Nevertheless, critics of Florida's reforms have sought to pooh-pooh findings like these. For example, the PIRLS results sparked a new round of complaints that the Sunshine State's 4th grade reading scores are inflated by Florida's policy of retaining low-performing 3rd graders. (In 2002, Florida ended "social promotion" — a practice which does students no favors in the long run — and began requiring students who failed 3rd grade tests to repeat that grade so that they can get extra help before advancing to the next grade.)

It's hard to find fault with Florida's anti-social-promotion policy. Yet, even if one wants to look only at students not held back, a 2012 study published by *Education Next* found that Florida's "gains among initial 3rd graders were very substantial" (about .36 standard deviations). According to Marcus Winters of the Manhattan Institute, this is "more than enough to justify Florida's claims that its gains have outpaced those in other states." Similarly, Andrew Ujifusa of *Education Week* summarized the PIRLS results by saying, "Florida has to be pleased that all by itself it can go punch-for-punch with traditional academic powerhouses like Hong Kong."

### Policy Reforms Pay Off

What is instructive about these (and other) signs of Florida's success is that they correlate to policy reforms adopted by Florida leaders. And they represent a reward for policymakers' boldness in seizing opportunities that other states were reluctant to pursue.

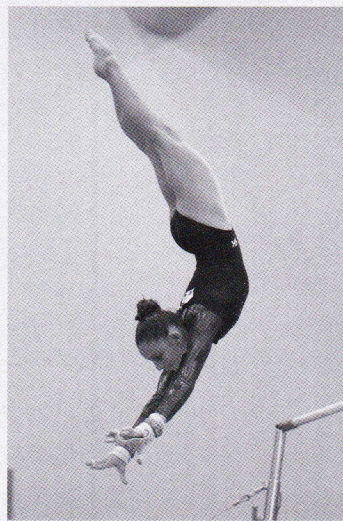
Consider, for example, Florida's groundbreaking leadership in the area of digital education (reflected in our number 3 national ranking according to Digital Learning Now). This

largely came about because the pioneering Florida Virtual School (FLVS) began providing innovative course offerings for students at a time when many policymakers elsewhere looked suspiciously at digital learning, wondering how students could possibly learn as much in online courses as they do in conventional classrooms.

Today, FLVS course enrollments easily exceed 100,000 — more than any other state. And as several of the accompanying sidebars illustrate, the personal stories of many FLVS students testify to the success of digital learning — as do a number of recent research studies.

For example, a recent study of Advanced Placement (AP) test scores found that FLVS students matched the cumulative national average for passing scores on AP tests (58%). Moreover, FLVS students had a higher passing rate

### Not Many Gaps in Her Knowledge



Charly Santagado had a high school schedule more like that of a professional athlete than a typical student. Every morning, she awoke early to begin work on the full slate of online classes she took through the Florida Virtual School (FLVS). During the middle part of the day, the teen gymnast practiced vaulting, floor exercises, and other routines at a gym in Orlando. Then, in the evenings (and often on weekends), she'd be back home on

the computer completing her FLVS assignments.

Now taking a "gap year" between high school and college, Charly says she appreciates the flexibility of FLVS, which allowed her to pursue her love for gymnastics. And she liked that FLVS allowed her to work at her own pace. "Sometimes in regular school you get held up when you already understand the material," she says, "Or if you don't yet understand, the teacher forces you to move on, and there are gaps in your knowledge."

Charly doesn't have many gaps in her knowledge. She took nine Advanced Placement courses through FLVS and won an academic scholarship to Rutgers — thanks to a 2300 SAT score! (She also received an athletic scholarship from the Rutgers gymnastics team.) Charly hopes to go to law school one day and then enter politics — an interest she cultivated as the Politics editor for the FLVS online newspaper.

than the state average on 11 of 15 Advanced Placement subject tests — and a higher passing rate than the national average in AP Spanish, AP Computer Science, AP Calculus BC, AP Macroeconomics, AP English Literature, and AP Environmental Science.

What is particularly compelling about these FLVS findings is that they show strong results in a variety of disciplines by a surprisingly diverse student population. (Minority students accounted for 46 percent of all FLVS enrollments in AP courses.) This provides further evidence that digital learning's remarkable potential is not restricted to certain subject clusters or to particular demographic groups.

Of course, Florida's learning gains have hardly been restricted to the digital realm. A 2012 study by David Figlio of Northwestern University found that low-income students

attending private schools thanks to Florida's Tax Credit Scholarship program are keeping pace with their national cohort. This is "the policy equivalent of saying they gained a year's worth of knowledge in a year," writes education analyst Jon East.

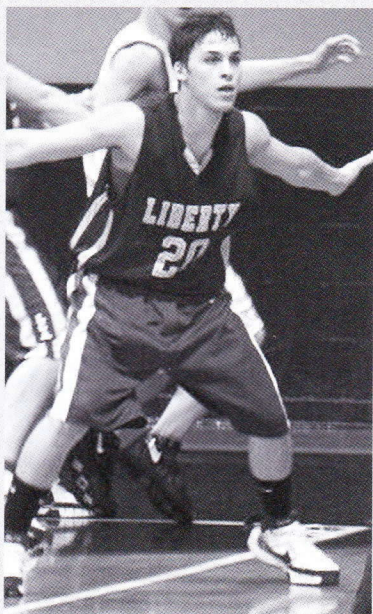
What makes this finding so important is that it shows significant learning gains among a population that had previously fared poorly in conventional public schools. Indeed, Figlio found that instead of skimming public schools of their highest-performing low-income students, the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship program tends to attract "the weakest prior performers on standardized tests" — and that this correlation "is becoming stronger over time."

A 2011 study by the Florida Department of Education found similar results for disadvantaged students now attending public charter schools. When compared to students in conventional public schools, Florida charter school students showed greater annual learning gains (in 79 of 96 categories) and higher percentages performing at or above grade level on standardized tests (in 50 of 54 categories). In addition, Florida charter schools had greater success (in 16 of 18 categories) closing the achievement gap between minority and white students than conventional public schools.

Lest there be any doubt, students in conventional public schools are also benefitting from education reforms adopted by Florida policymakers in recent years. Some of these gains appear to be the direct by-products of standards-raising reforms. For example, student achievement test scores have gone up in public schools since Florida began issuing annual grades for such schools.

Some of these gains appear to be the indirect benefits of choice-expanding reforms. For example, a study by economist Tim Sass found that conventional public schools in competition with charter schools saw larger gains in student math scores than traditional schools that lacked any charter school competition. Similarly, a Manhattan Institute study found statistically-significant learning gains among special needs students in Florida public schools after the McKay scholarship program was

### Hoopster Rises to Meet Tall Challenge



When Luis Aponte, Jr. was a senior in high school in 2011, he waged a friendly battle for class valedictorian with another student — his girlfriend. In the end, Luis managed to win the prize without losing his girl, which is just the sort of outcome one might expect from a hoops star known for his deft maneuvering on the basketball court.

Still, no one should think that Luis's success came without a lot of hard work. In fact, when Luis was a boy, his father worried that his son wasn't being challenged enough in the classroom. One day, when Luis was about to enter fourth grade, his parents learned that their family qualified for the Florida Tax Credit (FTC) Scholarship. So, they transferred Luis from his neighborhood public school to Blue Lake Academy, a private school for grades 4-7 that offered Luis what he called

a "completely different environment" for learning.

Luis thrived at his new school, and at Liberty Christian Academy, where he attended high school. While Luis believes "you can get an education anywhere if you put your mind to it," he's grateful for the opportunities his Step Up for Students FTC scholarship provided him. Because of this program, he was able to tackle a full load of challenging courses (which included some dual enrollment classes at Lake-Sumter Community College) while working part time at a grocery store and playing point guard on the school basketball team.

Luis is now enrolled at the Adventist University of Health Sciences where he is studying nuclear medicine technology. He frequently returns to his alma mater to watch his younger brother, another Step Up scholar who is "ridiculous at basketball," deftly maneuvering his way to success.

created, giving Florida families the opportunity to send their special needs children to a private school instead. (Thanks in part to McKay, Florida ranked number 1 in the country for combined math and reading learning gains among special needs students, according to a recent analysis of NAEP scores from 2003-2011.)

So, a rising tide has been lifting all boats. And a wide variety of policy reforms have helped contribute to this tide. Indeed, Ladner says part of the genius behind Florida's turnaround in education is that state policymakers adopted a multi-faceted strategy for reforming "everything all at once" rather than a take-it-slow, one-reform-at-a-time approach. This made it more difficult for defenders of the status quo to quash much-needed reforms. And this also made it easier to fashion creative strategies for meeting each student's unique learning needs, oftentimes by combining course offerings from different providers into a single academic schedule. (Note, for example, that many of the students featured in this paper's accompanying vignettes complemented coursework from their main school with courses from a virtual school, a community college, or some other provider.)

### A New Wave of Reform

Just as football programs can sometimes get stuck in the past, reliving days of prior glory, education systems can get stuck as well — resting on their laurels rather than building upon successful reforms. Florida policymakers need to

remember this, lest the many educational challenges that still face our state go unaddressed.

Clearly, now is not the time for education reformers to rest, and it is certainly not the time for policymakers to revert back to running the teachers unions' unimaginative old plays ("Just spend more!") that resulted in high levels of failure and mediocrity. Indeed, any new spending on education needs to be directed toward targeted priorities such as rewarding teachers who have distinguished themselves in the classroom, equipping students with the digital resources they need to succeed in the 21st Century world of learning, and addressing funding inequities that currently hinder the spread of non-traditional schooling options.

In other words, the need of the hour isn't so much for Florida policymakers to "open up the checkbook" as it is to "open up the playbook" and expand creative learning options for students in a new wave of education reform. What sorts of reforms are needed? Here are several places policymakers ought to start (all at once):

- **Eliminate 'Old School' Barriers to Online Learning**

Online learning expert Michael Horn of the Innosight Foundation warns that much of the promise of digital education will be thwarted if public school systems attempt to "co-opt online learning" by trying to squeeze new technologies into old frameworks. The big danger, according to Horn, is that schools will adopt policies

### Riding a Wave of Family Success

When Sue Wainio-Oato wants to compare notes with a fellow student taking college courses, all she has to do is talk to her high school daughter, Emily. Sue is a small business owner pursuing a marketing degree at the State College of Florida (SCF) after a long hiatus from the classroom. Emily is a sophomore at Manatee School for the Arts (MSA), a charter school in Palmetto that has a dual enrollment program with SCF.

Mom and daughter aren't taking any of the same courses — and might not even be simultaneously earning college credit had a program like Emily's existed when Sue was her age. (Sue was a strong student who graduated early after her junior year.) Needless to say, both are glad Emily now has schooling options that didn't exist in her mother's day.

Emily has been attending MSA since the sixth grade. While there she has developed a keen interest in science, and it has become her favorite subject.

"I like how science class is structured here," Emily says, "and I am happy that the school strives for good qualifications

like being an A rated school."

Emily credits her teachers for making the learning environment comfortable with their friendliness and honesty. She plays club volleyball and is a member of the MSA Strikers Ballroom Team, a dance program designed for students interested in competitive and social dancing. Emily also likes to surf, a passion she picked up from her Hawaiian father.

When asked about her career aspirations, Emily says "I love to dance and teach dance," and that a career that would enable her to do both would be ideal.



that run contrary to the creative possibilities that digital offers — in effect, taking a “disruptive innovation” highly adaptable to the needs of each student and forcing it to work within a one-size-fits-all paradigm.

Horn’s fears are already being seen in the state of Florida, where some local school systems run virtual schools based on an “old school” bricks-and-mortar model. To prevent such misuses, Florida policymakers need to adopt measures that free students from requirements that digital courses must be taken on a school’s premises, during the school day, in accordance with the traditional school calendar, or from digital providers that enjoy “home district preferences.”

Does this mean that online classes can never be taught during the school day in computer labs at bricks-and-mortar schools? Of course not. But it does mean that digital education ought not occur only in this manner or primarily in this manner. Indeed, the advantages of digital learning are greatest when students have the freedom to learn in the “any time, any place, any path, any pace” manner that the Florida Virtual School (FLVS) has championed.

Ultimately, learning should be driven by the needs of the student. With the emergence of digital education, school systems can and should be adapting increasingly to the needs of each student rather than requiring students to (needlessly) adapt to the school system’s old ways of doing things.

- **Eliminate Discrimination Against Students Who Have Never Been Enrolled in a Public School**

In addition to eliminating “old school” barriers to online learning, Florida leaders should eliminate policies which deny eligibility for certain programs to students who have never been enrolled in a public school. Such policies currently exist for special needs students interested in using a McKay Scholarship at a private school and for middle and high school students interested in taking an online course.

Thankfully, barriers to online courses for Florida students that have no history with the public school system have been lifted at the K-5 level. They now need to be lifted for other students, since policies which discriminate against certain choices are inconsistent with a vision of education that views each child’s unique learning needs as the driving force behind his or her educational plan.

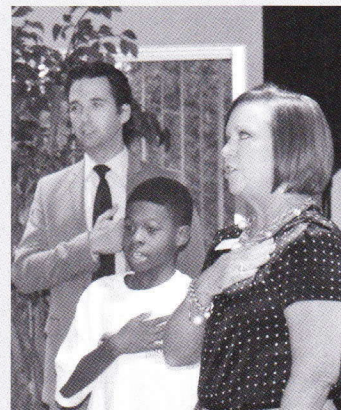
- **Address Funding Inequities Between Charter Schools and Traditional Public Schools**

According to a 2012 Florida TaxWatch study, “charter schools may receive, in total, as little as 68 to 71 percent of what traditional district schools do on a per FTE (full-time

### **Blending the Best of Both Worlds**

R.J. Wood always thought he’d like to ride a yellow school bus. So, one day his mom, Freddi, suggested that he take the bus from his Friday morning Creative Constructive class to his Friday afternoon Sports Performance class. “He discovered that riding the bus is way over-rated,” Freddi laughs. “But it didn’t hinder his enthusiasm for his school.”

And why would it? R.J. attends the International Community School (ICS) in Winter Park, a fully-accredited private school that offers its students an innovative “blended” curriculum. Two days a week, ICS students take a full slate of academic courses taught by certified teachers in classrooms grouped by grade level; and two days a week, ICS students receive instruction at home from their parents using lesson plans developed by ICS teachers. On Fridays, ICS students take a wide array of mixed-grade electives at the school — and at a nearby gym in the afternoon.



Now a 6th grader, R.J. excels academically. He won a Constitution Day quiz game at the Orlando Science Center last September (see photo) and enjoys learning both at home and at school. “When R.J. was approaching school age, my husband and I were intrigued by home schooling,” reports Freddi, who studied law at UCLA after graduating from Emory. “But I would have never felt comfortable doing everything at home; so, ICS was ideal for us because it fosters a unique partnership between teachers and parents.”

This partnership extends beyond just a commitment to academic excellence. “My husband and I do not want our children’s spiritual training to be separated from their academic life,” Freddi says, in describing her appreciation for ICS’s Christian worldview.

Thus, rather than seeing her kids’ back-and-forth shuffle from home to school as a disjointed, bifurcated education, Freddi sees it as just the opposite: an integrated life of learning, which offers her children “the best of both worlds.”

equivalent) basis” because revenues from local property and sales taxes are not often shared equally. This pattern is consistent with funding inequities in other states. In fact, a recent nationwide study by researchers at Ball State University found that “more than 85 percent of the disparity between charter and district school funding resulted from differences in access to local revenues.”

To address this inequity, Florida policymakers should consider mandating that charter schools receive the same amount of per-pupil funding from local tax sources that district schools receive. Policymakers should also consider allowing charter schools to receive federal and state education monies directly (a practice currently found in 24 states) rather than having such monies routed through local school district offices.

- **Give Those Trapped in Poorly-Performing District Schools a ‘Parent Trigger’**

The recent motion picture *Won’t Back Down*, though filmed in Pittsburgh, is loosely based on the real-life story of a California mother whose child was trapped in a woefully-underperforming district school. To give her child a way out, this mom teamed with a sympathetic teacher to bring about reform. Specifically, they convinced California policymakers to give those trapped in poorly-performing schools a legal means to “trigger” change — by transforming a district school into a charter school, if the parents so want.

In the wake of the California reform, “parent trigger” laws have been adopted by Connecticut, Indiana, Louisiana, Mississippi, Ohio, and Texas. State Rep. Michael Bileca of Miami believes Florida ought to join this list. He is absolutely right.

- **Adopt Education Savings Accounts for Blended Learners (and Other Students)**

In a groundbreaking new report by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, Matt Ladner argues that Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) are “the way of the future” — providing an equitable way for all students to receive a “customized” education of the highest quality for the lowest price.

First adopted by the state of Arizona in 2011 for special needs students interested in alternatives to their local public schools, Education Savings Account programs take 90 percent of the state dollars that would otherwise go to a child’s public school and puts them in an account

## Seeing Opportunities Where Others See None

Several years ago, Willow Tufano’s mother was helping process a home foreclosure along Florida’s Gulf coast. When Willow learned that the man in charge of the property planned to dispose of the household belongings left behind, the North Port preteen asked if she could have them instead. He agreed. And soon Willow began posting notices on Craig’s List, selling these and other used items she found at yard sales and by “dumpster diving.”

Willow quickly learned the used-goods market. And she carefully saved her earnings, amassing a total of \$6,000 over an 18-month period. Then, one day when she was just 14 years old, Willow overheard her mother talking about a home once valued at \$100,000 that was now on the market for \$16,000.



Willow announced that she’d like to buy the home. And buy it she did — for \$12,000 (half with her savings, half with funds borrowed from her mother).

Not surprisingly, Willow’s home purchase attracted lots of attention. USA TODAY and several TV networks did stories about her. The *Ellen* show had her on as a guest, where host

Ellen DeGeneres presented her with a new clothes dryer and a \$10,000 gift certificate from Ace Hardware.

Using these gifts — and the \$700 in rent Willow now collects every month from tenants nearly twice her age — Willow recently bought another “fixer-upper” to rent out. “I calculated that I can make more doing this than I can in a typical teenage job,” she says, innocently.

In case you’re wondering, Willow takes a full slate of advanced courses through the Florida Virtual School (FLVS). And she plans to go to college someday. Willow says taking classes online gives her the scheduling flexibility she needs to run her business. “On trash days, being able to go out and get the good stuff that people leave on the street is really important,” Willow says. “If it weren’t for FLVS, I’d never be able to do this.”

Willow’s knack for seeing business opportunities where others see none is just what one might expect from a thrifty 15-year-old who’s been conditioned to see schooling options beyond the conventional.

managed by the child's parents (with parameters set by the state to ensure accountability).

Parents may then use these funds for a wide variety of educational purposes, including private school tuition, online learning programs, educational therapies from a certified practitioner, textbooks, curriculum, private tutorial services, standardized test fees, college tuition, and/or contributions to a qualified college savings plan.

The case for ESAs is especially powerful with special needs students — where new digital education programs (like Rethink Autism) are providing learning resources and assessment tools that can be personalized and paced to each child's unique situation. But Arizona has already expanded ESA eligibility to include other special populations (children attending public schools graded D or F, foster care children, and active duty military dependents); and Ladner believes ESA eligibility should spread in time to include all students.

To be sure, ESAs enjoy a number of advantages that are well suited to our day. They make it easier for policymakers to avoid the tricky church-state issues that often hinder the expansion of K-12 learning options. They make it easier for parents to enroll their child in the school of their choice — whether it be public, charter, private, religious, secular, bricks-and-mortar, digital, home, or some combination of the above.

Indeed, consistent with 21st Century needs and possibilities, ESAs make it easier for students to receive high-quality instruction from multiple sources — whether

that is done in a formal “blended” program that combines digital instruction with classroom instruction (such as the Carpe Diem School in Yuma City, Arizona), or in a “hybrid school” that combines classroom teaching with parental instruction (as in the case of R.J. Wood's family — see sidebar story), or in the “patchwork” manner common among homeschooling families, many of whom supplement home instruction with courses taught online, at community colleges, by art or music instructors, and the like.

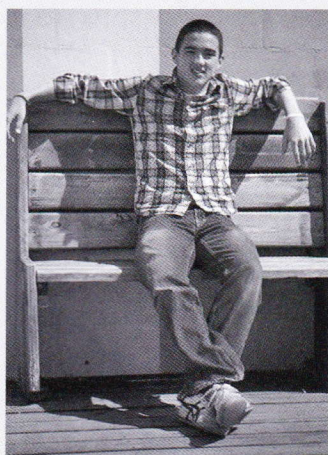
For policymakers, ESAs have yet another extremely compelling advantage: They put downward pressure on costs while putting upward pressure on quality. Indeed, because ESA funds can be used for a wide variety of purposes — including even college savings — parents have an incentive to shop for education in the same way they shop for food, clothing, or other necessities. That is, ESAs give parents an incentive to seek the highest possible quality for the lowest possible price.

## Conclusion

Over the last decade, market-based reforms in Florida's educational system have helped catapult the Sunshine State into a position of national leadership in education. To maintain our state's edge, and to serve our state's students in the best possible way, Florida policymakers need to “open up the playbook” in a new wave of reform that expands learning options for all students today.

## Flipping the School Day (without Skipping a Beat)

Ian Maser has always known kids who spend their schooldays doing academics and their afternoons taking music



lessons. But when the Tallahassee native (and gifted musician) saw the array of music class opportunities available at his public high school, he decided to do just about the opposite.

Ian signed up for as many music classes as his Leon High schedule would allow — five courses one year, four more in two others — and then looked for ways to meet his academic requirements outside the

normal school day. One summer, Ian self-taught himself Chemistry I so that he could skip directly to AP Chemistry in the fall. Another year, he took a Spanish II class online. (It also helped that Ian had earned some required credits while he was in middle school.)

In the end, Ian graduated in 2011 with academic honors — and with numerous music accolades, including four-time All-State trombonist, first chair in the Tallahassee Youth Orchestra, and All-District and Tri-State honors. Why, even his weekend garage band won the 2010 Best Music Video Award at the Ft. Lauderdale International Film Festival.

Not surprisingly, Ian received a scholarship offer to attend Juilliard — but he turned it down so that he could attend the prestigious New England Conservatory of Music instead. If Ian's high school experiences — the first movement of a very musical life — are any indication of things to come, his future is certain to be filled with brilliant flourishes.

### About our Storytellers . . .

Three of The James Madison Institute's college student interns contributed significantly to the vignettes in this publication:



*Kelly Barber, a junior majoring in history at the University of Florida, did much of the research and writing on the stories about Charly Santagado and Luis Aponte, Jr.*

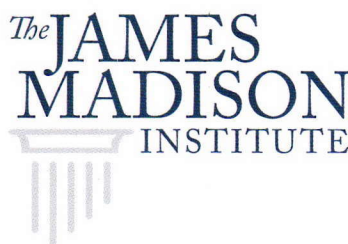


*LaCrai Mitchell, a sophomore majoring in broadcast journalism at Florida A & M University, did much of the research and writing on the story about Emily Wainio-Oato.*



*Keith Leslie, a recent graduate of Florida State University in economics, contributed a number of important flourishes to the story about Ian Maser.*

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