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For These Families, Vouchers Bring A Needed Change

By Anya Kamenetz



Cristina Spanò for NPR

Dorothy, of Spring Hill, Fla., has a 15-year-old son with spina bifida and developmental delays, and her 13-year-old daughter is, she says, "mildly autistic." Neither was happy at public school.

"My son was in a lockdown classroom with gang members. It was a bad situation. I was afraid he was going to get hurt," Dorothy says. "My daughter was getting bullied because she spoke out of turn or would get upset easily. Twenty kids in a classroom was a lot for her."

Today, Dorothy is homeschooling her son and daughter with the help of a novel item on the school choice menu: the Gardiner Scholarship. This voucher program, created in 2014, can be used by students with specific disabilities, including autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy and Down syndrome. It has grown rapidly and is now used by 7,000 Florida students.

A controversial education bill now before Florida's governor, Rick Scott, would add \$30 million to the program's budget, amid other expansions to school choice.

Using the Gardiner, which provides an average \$10,000 for each child, Dorothy has been able to purchase tablet computers, a camera, a telescope, books, online courses and other supplies and equipment to customize a curriculum for both teenagers.

"They are doing better than I ever could have imagined," says Dorothy (we're not using her last name to protect her children's privacy). "Neither take any [psychiatric] medication anymore. There are no overstimulation issues."

Only a few other states, including New Hampshire and North Carolina, support homeschoolers. Compared with charter school choice or private school vouchers, these

programs give families the widest possible leeway to customize their children's education while still receiving public support to pay for it.

President Trump has shed a spotlight on this idea. His 100-day plan mentioned "redirect[ing] education dollars to give parents the right to send their kid to the public, private, charter, magnet, religious or home school of their choice." However, some in the homeschooling movement oppose vouchers. The Home School Legal Defense Association has called them "a slippery slope toward more federal involvement and control in homeschooling."

Compared with other states, Florida has some of the stricter accountability requirements for homeschooling families, whether they use the Gardiner or not. They include maintaining a portfolio of student work, which is subject to inspection at any time by the district superintendent, and submitting an annual evaluation of student work, which can take the form of a state test.

The Gardiner has an additional layer of review. Amy Graham is the senior policy director for Step Up For Students, the nonprofit which administers the Gardiner. The group's role includes verifying that the expenditures that parents submit actually serve educational needs. "We've had a variety of things that have been denied," she says, such as toys or entertainment videos.

I spoke with four families using the Gardiner, and all said it was working out better for them than conventional school. Ewan, 14, lives in Merritt Island on Florida's Space Coast. He has autism and a passion for science. But, he struggled to adjust to public school. He once walked out of his kindergarten class, crossing six lanes of traffic, intending to go home for lunch.

The worst part for him was the noise. "I hate the sound of children being loud. I just want to rip my hair out," he says. His school tried to help, giving him headphones to amplify the teacher's voice and cancel out background sounds. But that made it even more difficult than it already was to connect with peers.

By sixth grade, Ewan was placed in a class with students who had significant cognitive challenges. But, he told his parents and his teachers in a meeting, "I just want to learn what everyone else is learning." His parents took him out and enrolled him in Florida Virtual School, an online charter program. With the ability to study in peace and quiet, and rewind and re-watch lectures, his mother says his grades went from Fs and Cs to As and Bs within one marking period.

After a few years, seeking even more customization,

his parents applied for the Gardiner. Now Ewan makes his own schedule, attending astronomy lectures at nearby universities, studying German, sampling free online college courses and learning to take photographs and use his own telescope. "He is blowing me away with some of the stuff he is understanding," says his mother, Alicia. "And that is because of the Gardiner."

The Gardiner is not a good fit for every special-needs student. Alicia points out that \$10,000 "doesn't go a long way" for students who might need speech, occupational or behavioral therapy on a daily or weekly basis, as Ewan did when he was younger. In Dorothy's case, her children's therapies are paid for by Medicaid, because she adopted them from medical foster care. But, "a lot of parents who do have children with more complex needs are still left in limbo," Alicia says.

Accepting the Gardiner prohibits families from double-dipping into services or even extracurricular activities provided at public schools, says Amy Graham at Step Up For Students. "A cross-check is done to make sure they aren't enrolled in public school."

And homeschooling is only an economic option in the first place for families in which at least one parent has a flexible schedule. Both Alicia and Dorothy work from home while supervising their teenagers.

As we pointed out previously in NPR Ed's school

choice series, special-needs families who accept private school vouchers often give up their federal rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. This includes the right to a Free Appropriate Public Education, or FAPE.

The same is true of the Gardiner, says Amy Graham. "We have language in the Gardiner Scholarship law that says that by participating in the Gardiner Program you're not allowed to have FAPE. You're not allowed to have FAPE. You're giving that up." The state will still evaluate students, but if families take them out of the system, they are no longer eligible for services. Alicia, Ewan's mother, says that's a choice that families shouldn't have to make. "Florida is all about school choice," says Alicia. "But it's only a choice where the choices are equally beneficial for a student. Otherwise we're being herded into a decision." Still, for families like Dorothy's and Alicia's, the tradeoff is worth it. So, too, for Tracy, a mother in Citrus County, Fla.

Tracy's son, now 17, has an autism diagnosis and loves computer programming. "We had a long, long fight with the public schools before the Gardiner came out," she says. "Often the behavioral plans weren't followed. [Other students] beat him up and threatened to kill him... The school took his assistive devices and gave them to other children."

Today, Tracy says, he is studying video game design with the help of a high-speed computer and online courses, all paid for by the Gardiner.



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