



August 11, 2017

# Scholarship helps student with autism

By Julie Gargotta

When his son was first diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder at the age of five, Nathan Nadeau said sorting through care options and therapies was overwhelming — and costly.

For tuition for his private school education, his son Dominic used a McKay Scholarship, the nation’s first voucher program for students with special needs.

Last year, the family switched to the Gardiner Scholarship.

“It was a game changer for our family,” Nadeau said. It allowed us to be more specific with the therapies he’s getting.”

The scholarship program allows parents to use the funds to pay for a variety of educational services, from tutoring and curriculum to therapy and textbooks, supplementing their education.

More than 7,000 students benefited from the scholarship last year.

In Dominic's case, the \$10,000 he received went towards a

summer of speech therapy and a social skills camp.

“I liked it, I went overnight, I did rock climbing, swimming,” the fifth-grader said.

His father said the camp gave his son confidence. However, the road to getting the scholarship has been long, for both the Nadeaus and the bill's author.

Originally called the Personal Learning Scholarship Account, the scholarship was later named in honor of former Sen. Andy Gardiner from Orlando.

“We heard a lot from families that would tell you, yes, the education piece is important, but so is the therapy,” Gardiner said.

For Gardiner, the scholarship was personal: His now

13-year-old son has Down syndrome.

“When we were on this journey, it’s overwhelming to some extent, and it’s also an overwhelming amount of information,” Gardiner revealed. “I wanted the state of Florida to be seen as a leader.”

In 2016, the Senate approved a bill which expanded the scholarship. This year, the Florida legislature earmarked \$107.4 million to the program for 2017–2018. Gov. Rick Scott expanded the scholarship by \$30 million in June, allowing for coverage of more special needs situations, as part of a wide-ranging education bill.

“We’re now tied to it and proud to be tied to it,”

Gardiner exclaimed. “Mainly it’s the freedom and choice for families to find the best fit for their child.” For the Nadeaus, finding a good fit for Dominic meant the boy following his principal father from one school to another as he changed jobs. “He can become unnecessarily frazzled, unable to process,” Nadeau said. “I kind of feel



Dominic Nadeau, left, who has autism spectrum disorder sits with his father, Nathan, who is principal of St. Charles Borromeo Catholic School in Orlando. (Julie Gargotta, staff)

distracted sometimes, and kids are talking and it’s frustrating,” said Dominic. “I can squeeze my stress ball, I can lay my head down for a few seconds.”

The 10-year-old student added that although having his father at his school can be "scary" at times because he's the principal and he can "get in trouble," it also gives him immeasurable comfort.

The scholarship comforts the family as well.

“I think it’s good because the kids that don’t have the scholarship and need help can now get it,” said Dominic.

“It gives a lot of hope to families that feel hopeless,” said Nadeau. “Gardiner comes in and fills that gap between health insurance and therapies families can’t afford.”