Special education is more complex than Maxwell realizes

BY DONNA BERMAN

("Voucher schools can reject kids with disabilities," Aug. 7) argued that private schools can discriminate against children with disabilities. However, individual public schools can also reject students with disabilities. I know this from personal experience. Worse still, the column was published while Volusia County public schools are under investigation by the Justice Department for discriminating against students with autism.

My son Brandon, who had autism, was wheelchair-bound, had a brain tumor, auditory processing disorder, muscular dystrophy, seizures and more, was denied admission to a local public school after they learned he had a feeding tube.

A public school turned away my son because it was not equipped to handle his needs. Although disappointing, that's not discrimination.

Individual public schools, like private schools, can't possibly serve all students with unique needs. It would be financially and professionally irresponsible for schools to take students which they cannot possibly educate. At some point it's the parent's obligation to educate their child, yet in previous years we didn't have a choice that wouldn't penalize special-needs parents.

As a parent of a child with autism, I experienced the best and worst that Florida has to offer children with unique special needs. We've done public school, self-contained classes, summer school, private school and even hospital homebound. It wasn't until we received the Gardiner Scholarship and I homeschooled my son that his learning truly began.

And even though private schools in Volusia County failed Brandon, I would never take away another parent's right to choose a school simply because I found the options lacking.

Brandon was a space-age kid stuck in a stone age-system. One size fits all didn't work for him and public schools failed him too.

Brandon made progress when instruction was supplemented by therapy, but the therapy was inconsistent at best. By first grade his public school wanted to mainstream him despite my protests he wasn't ready. His learning and his behavior rapidly declined.

After his school discovered Brandon was having seizures daily, I was called to pick him up from school so much, I was fired from my job. While he was still a fifth grader the district moved him to a middle school where disruptions, upset and agitated him, setting Brandon back emotionally and academically once again.

He was later moved to a self-contained class for students with emotional behavior problems and despite three adults in the class, my son had his nose broken by the one and only other student.

I felt like I was in almost constant warfare with my school district over the education provided Brandon. IEP meetings occurred semi-annually. I even had to hire lawyers to fight for my son. Twice!

The issue is complex, and I'm not convinced Mr. Maxwell understands.

On one hand he rightly criticizes private schools that don't have properly credentialed teachers, but on the other hand he criticizes private schools for not taking students with exceptional needs precisely because their school and teachers are not credentialed for those kids. It's almost like he's treating kids with special needs as prop in a crusade against school choice.

Anyone who cares about special education would be looking into the inconsistent, and sometimes difficult, treatment parents and students face in schools across the state. It may explain why the parents of more than 40,000 children opted out every year to take McKay or Gardiner Scholarships. People might understand that parents often fight with their districts over IEPs and that even great IEPs sometimes are never followed.

The issue is so complex and difficult that the one-size-fits-all concept cannot be a solution. Parents of children with special needs must have a choice.

Life didn't get better for me, or my son, until we found the Gardiner Scholarship. For that, I'm eternally grateful.

The author lives in Volusia County.