Special-needs kids will soar with new scholarship money

By JULIE KLEFFEL
Guest columnist

Like every parent, I want my child to be as successful as possible in her education and in life. But the path to success for my daughter, Faith, will look different than that of most kids.

Faith is a child with Down syndrome. Her unique abilities are what make her so special; yet they pose challenges to our family when it comes to her path through the school system in Florida. Thankfully, because of a new scholarship now available for Florida students with disabilities, I will be able to create a customized education plan to help Faith succeed.

As a family, we will be able to select the best school, services and therapies to fit Faith’s unique needs.

We faced many challenges early in her life. Because of hearing issues, Faith’s speech was delayed, and we had to communicate through sign language. We also questioned whether she would ever be able to walk. It was a scary time.

With much one-on-one tutoring and many hours spent in therapy, Faith has blossomed. Today she is a bubbly 7-year-old in choir. She can read, write and do basic math. Not only can Faith walk, she can run three miles and is on a swim team.

Faith has made these strides with the help of one-on-one instruction to focus on the areas where she needs the most help.

When she was enrolled in preschool, Faith wasn’t receiving the attention she needed. In total, she was getting as little as five to seven minutes of individualized speech therapy each week, and speech articulation was our biggest challenge.

After that year of preschool, I decided to educate Faith at home so she could have an individualized education and one-on-one focus she needed from her teacher. Now she gets an hour of speech therapy twice a week.

As a widow and the sole provider for Faith, home schooling and paying out of pocket for therapy has been financially difficult. We’ve had to make tough choices and limit therapies at times — services that would have helped.

But this school year, things will be different for Faith. This year, we are applying for a Personal Learning Scholarship Account, and I hope more parents of kids with unique abilities will take a moment to learn more and apply.

The PLSA is different from other state scholarships because it lets moms and dads whose kids are not in public schools direct funds toward any combination of programs — schools, therapists, specialists, curriculum, technology, even a college savings account — that the parents think will provide the best path to their child’s educational success. The right combination of support can help unlock education opportunities, and parents know what combination is best for their kids.

These scholarships empower moms and dads of students with disabilities with the flexibility to create education plans custom-made for their children — plans to help these unique boys and girls succeed in school and in everyday life.

PLSAs will be life-changing for my family and potentially thousands of others in our state.

Students like Faith with Down syndrome — and others with autism, cerebral palsy, Prader-Willi syndrome, spina bifida, Williams syndrome, and select intellectual disabilities — can apply for the scholarship. Also, kindergartners deemed high risk because of developmental delays are eligible.

Applications will open Friday, and I look forward to being one of the first parents to add my child’s name to the list.

For my family, a PLSA will mean Faith can maintain the speech therapies that are working so well for her, and we can increase or add to them as needed with things like physical or occupational therapy.

I am excited and hopeful to see how Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts will help my daughter — and many other Florida students — find their perfect path to success.

Julie Kleffel of Longwood is the sole caregiver for her 7-year-old daughter with Down syndrome.