Lawmakers should expand Personal Learning Scholarships

Donna Berman
My View

A new scholarship that lets parents individualize education services for children with special needs has changed my son’s life, and now is no time for Florida to turn back the clock. Lawmakers in both chambers this spring voted unanimously to expand the Personal Learning Scholarship Account, but the bill died amid a broader disagreement over the state budget.

We’ve come too far over the past 11 months to let that happen.

My son Brandon, who has autism, and I traveled to Tallahassee last year as intervenors in a lawsuit the Florida Education Association filed after the new scholarship became law. Thankfully, the state won that case, and this year Republicans and Democrats in the House and Senate responded by voting together to give this opportunity to even more students. They agreed to broaden the definition of autism, as one of the eight covered disabilities, and to include 3- and 4-year-olds and to let as many as 5,000 students participate.

As a mother of an autistic child, those commitments were exciting.

The PLSA program gives parents control of education dollars, allowing us to use the funds for school tuition, fees, textbooks, school supplies, curriculum, tutors and therapies. Unspent money rolls over from year to year and can even be saved for college or vocational school.

Brandon was diagnosed with autism at age 6. He also lives with muscular dystrophy, an auditory processing disorder, cortical atrophy, a brain tumor and spends much of his time in a wheelchair. Brandon has been in public schools and a private school with the McKay Scholarship. When he was really sick last year, we used the public school’s hospital homebound education.

Enrolling in the new program was a no-brainer because Brandon and I have tried nearly every other education option in Florida.

Before the PLSA program, nothing we tried worked for Brandon. He was a space age kid living in a Stone Age system.

I’m not intending to disparage the public or private school teachers who worked with and cared for Brandon. Most cared deeply about Brandon and the other children. But sometimes the schools were not equipped to meet his needs. Other times the schools simply couldn’t figure him out. The limitations often meant a one-size-fits-most style education.

Experts told me years ago that Brandon would never be able to read, but today he’s picking up books for fun. It wasn’t magic. Brandon was overwhelmed and intimidated by the number of words on a page. He shut down as a result. Instead of traditional paper books, I downloaded books onto an iPad and increased the font size to reduce the number of words on the page. It worked.

Brandon is reading, socializing and making friends. Once, I worried about how my son would live when schooling ended. Now he’s finding his own self-worth, and I think he’ll be OK.

A lot can change in a year, and we have the PLSA to thank. When lawmakers return to work next month, Brandon and I hope expanding this scholarship is at the top of their list.

Donna Berman is a nurse in Port Orange and a parent intervenor in Fasal v. Scott, a lawsuit that sought to end the Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts program for special needs students.