

How Florida's New Educational Choice Program Helps Homeschoolers with Special Needs



by Mary Kurnik

The PLSA comes with two things not usually associated with a government education program: flexibility and freedom.

“ . . . weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning” (Psalm 30:5).

Dealing with special needs is a family journey, not limited to the child with the diagnosis. My son has unique abilities and learns differently. He happens to have autism.

For years prior to the diagnosis, we were perplexed by John's speech patterns, motor skills, inflexibility with daily life, and adverse reactions to bright lights, loud noises, and large crowds. During those years, John had testing and therapies, but those were done on a careful schedule and budget. Often late at night, after our children were asleep, my husband and I shed tears over how we would manage to meet John's short- and long-term needs as prescribed by his doctors.

The special needs journey is like a maze with hovering fog most days, especially in the beginning. I knew the therapies John's doctors suggested would be costly and time consuming. My thoughts were jumbled as I wondered, “How will God provide?” We are not alone, and I know thousands of parents of children with special needs live with these challenges every day.

For them, I'd like to offer a ray of hope.

One afternoon in July 2014, I received an email from Florida Parent Educator Association (FPEA) about a new special needs scholarship available for private school students and *homeschoolers!* The instant joy I felt from that email was overwhelming. We applied that day. A few weeks later, we were awarded.

The Personal Learning Scholarship Account, as it is called, provides state funds that can be used for a wide range of

education-related services. It can be used for curricula, instructional materials, technological devices, and specialized therapies from approved providers. It can be used for tuition or fees at eligible private schools and post-secondary educational institutions. It can even be used for contributions to an approved prepaid college program. Funds that aren't used are rolled over the next year, and they can continue to be used until the student graduates from a post-secondary educational institution or has gone four consecutive years after high school with no further education. The amount depends on the student's disability and the county he or she lives in, but the average amount per student right now is about \$10,000 per year. This is money we could never dream would be available to help John.

Even better, the PLSA comes with two things not usually associated with a government education program: flexibility

and freedom. The PLSA leaves it up to my husband and me—not the state, not a school, not an outsider—to determine what mix of programs and services we think are best for John. Central to the philosophy behind the creation of the program is the idea that we, the parents, must have the power to design our son's education in the way we know is best.

As a homeschool family, we stand on that foundation. Since we have home-schooled John from birth, we recognize his strengths and weaknesses and are able to tailor his education to fit his needs. The PLSA allows us to do this even more effectively. In 2015, this is still a radical idea. Right now, only one other state, Arizona, has a similar program. But times are changing. Lawmakers in a number of states are considering these types of "education savings accounts," and there is a lot of optimism they will follow the lead of Florida and Arizona.

With the PLSA, we will be able to help John in so many ways. We will add intensive math-skills practice online as well as handwriting and keyboarding programs and materials for robotics. The approved curricula list includes many publishing companies we already enjoy. We would like to purchase a tablet so John can access specialized apps for students with autism. We are also excited about the possibility of a musical instrument for him! Lastly, we are putting funds aside for his post-high school education. We have a peace of mind knowing this scholarship is in place.

The PLSA also led us down some unexpected paths. Unexpected, but good! Not

long after Florida Governor, Rick Scott, signed the bill that created the program into law, the state teachers union filed a lawsuit to stop it. We were asked to be one of six Florida families with special needs children to intervene in the case and help defend the program. My husband and I stepped out of our comfort zone and said yes. We appeared at a press conference,

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were interviewed by reporters, took part in a radio debate, and shared news about the PLSA at a special needs conference for homeschool families. In December 2014, a judge dismissed the suit, and in January, the teachers union decided to drop it instead of filing an appeal. We won!

We continue to be vocal. In February, my husband was asked to give a short speech at a summit in Tallahassee, organized by former Florida Governor, Jeb Bush's education foundation. His words left some attendees crying tears of

happiness. In March, he testified before two legislative committees in Tennessee that were considering a PLSA-like bill in that state. Meanwhile, John's older sister, who has a passion to help siblings of special needs children, wrote an article for the FPEA magazine and organized an event for its convention in May.

We are filled with gratitude to those who inspired the creation of the PLSA and most of all to God who provides faithfully for His children.

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And sometimes joy comes in the afternoon in the form of an email.

For more information about the PLSA program, please contact the Foundation for Excellence in Education at info@ExcelinEd.org or 850-391-4090. You can also contact Ron Matus at Step Up For Students, a nonprofit that administers the program, at rmatus@sufs.org or 727-580-1577. 📌

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Mary is a wife and mom of two. She and her husband John started homeschooling in 2004. She has a bachelor's degree in English Education and especially enjoys teaching creative writing to beginning writers at a homeschool co-op. Her passions are homeschooling, special needs, adoption and horses. Her hope is to have the PLSA option available in every state so parents everywhere can have additional assistance to help their children. You can contact Mary at maryedchoice@gmail.com.

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