OPENING DOORS
State-backed scholarships offer help for disabled students

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Brandon Berman
PORT ORANGE

Brandon focused on his iPad. His eyes never left the screen as he methodically matched pictures of coins.
"Five cents," said a voice from the tablet.
Brandon touched five pennies, dragged the group across the screen and dropped them over an image of a nickel. He repeated the exercise dozens of times, rarely giving an incorrect answer. Donna Berman's 16-year-old son, who has autism, spent most of his school years in the public schools, but this year she's trying what Brandon refers to as "mom school." Brandon's education is centered around real-life experiences, his mom said, supplemented with therapy appointments paid for by a new state-funded scholarship for students with disabilities.

Donna Berman
Volusia County parent of son with autism

"It's unfortunate when you have a space-age child with a caveman system. His needs out-taxed what the public school is able to give him."

Above. Donna Berman helps her 16-year-old son Brandon, who has autism, complete his schoolwork on a tablet computer recently in their home in Port Orange. Below. Brandon's service dog, Cody, is always nearby to provide him with assistance.

The Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts can be used for tuition and fees at private schools, therapists, specialists, educational materials and contributions to a prepaid college fund. The amount available per student depends on their location and the severity of their disabilities, but the average is about $10,000. The state budgeted $18 million for the scholarships this year, enough for about 1,800 students.

The scholarships have come under fire. Over the summer, a Lee County teacher, backed by the Florida Education Association, filed a lawsuit over the law that created the program. The same law expanded the Florida Tax Credit scholarship program, a state program that allows low-income

SEE EDUCATION, PAGE 8A
EDUCATION
FROM PAGE 1A

(and soon middle-income) children to attend private schools on the public dime. The suit alleged the law violated the state program that allows low-income (and soon middle-income) children to attend private schools on the public dime. The suit alleged the law violated the state constitution, which requires that each law only cover one subject. A Leon County judge threw out the suit, saying teacher Tom Faasen didn’t have the legal right to file the complaint.

But the Florida Education Association, the state’s largest teachers union, amended its complaint last week, adding Dade County parents as plaintiffs.

The scholarships are open to Florida students who are eligible to enroll in kindergarten through 12th grade in public schools, have specific disabilities and have an individual education program or a diagnosis of their disability from a doctor. The amount depends on several factors, including grade level, county of residence and the student’s level of need.

The new scholarship will help the Berman family pay for services tailored to Brandon, including occupational, speech and behavioral therapists. On a recent morning, behavioral assistant Laurel Sands sat with Brandon as he worked on the computer program. She spends 15 to 20 hours per week with Brandon, helping him with social and communication skills.

Many parents of children with special needs feel there’s “something missing,” from their child’s education, said Patrick Gibbons, public affairs manager for Step Up for Students, a Tampa-based nonprofit organization that distributes the state’s money to families. Step up for Students also does the Florida Tax Credit scholarship, which only provides money for private school tuition. The new scholarship helps families to combine services as they see fit.

“They’re really eager to have this account so they can pay for things that they really believe their child needs,” Gibbons said.

The new program is open to students with specific disabilities: autism, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, an intellectual disability, Prader-Willi syndrome or Spina bifida and Williams syndrome.

Kindergarten students who are considered at high risk because of developmental delays may also be eligible.

Home-schooled students like Brandon are eligible for the scholarships, but students can’t be enrolled in a public school or be receiving any other state-sponsored scholarship such as the McKay Scholarship, which also serves children with disabilities, or the Florida Tax Credit scholarship, which is awarded to low-income students.

Students are eligible for the scholarships until they turn 22, earn a high school diploma or enroll in public schools.

But Andrew Spar, president of the Volusia Teachers Organization, said he doesn’t feel there’s any real proof that students with disabilities are better off in the private sector than they would be in the public schools.

The state should be investing more in the public schools, he said, rather than giving money to families so they can go elsewhere. And he’s concerned that this program isn’t subject to the same high standards for accountability and transparency as the public schools.

“Sixteen-year-old Brandon Berman, who has autism, works out some math problems on a tablet recently at his Port Orange home. The state’s Personal Learning Scholarship Account helps the Berman family pay for services tailored to Brandon including occupational, speech and behavioral therapists. Brandon declined to be interviewed, but his mother spoke to the new program’s advantages. She’s hoping to use the allotment for therapy services and curricular materials for Brandon. Now an 11th-grader, Brandon has been in and out of public schools for years. He also spent a year and a half at a private school, thanks to support from the McKay Scholarship, another state-sponsored program for students with disabilities.

Brandon was diagnosed with autism at age 6, though his mom said she noticed much earlier that Brandon wasn’t hitting milestones at the expected ages. His preschool teacher agreed something was amiss. In addition to autism, Brandon has muscular dystrophy and suffers from seizures. His immunity also is impaired — catching the common cold from a classmate could kill Brandon, or at least land him in the hospital.

When Brandon was enrolled in the public schools, Berman said she frequently received calls asking her to pick up her son because he had seizures. A couple of years ago, she quit her job as an emergency room nurse and enrolled Brandon in Volusia’s hospital and homebound program (Berman’s husband, Corey, works as a real estate broker). A local teacher visited their home for about four hours per week, and Berman filled in the gaps to help Brandon complete his schoolwork.

Berman stresses she’s not opposed to public schools (she points out her daughter, Bailey, goes to public school).