A new state program helps pay for therapy, tutoring and private-school tuition, but the teachers' union and PTA are fighting it.

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Adriana Mantilla knew traditional school settings weren't working for her gifted but autistic son.

Ten-year-old Armando had tried a private school, but the staff didn't have the expertise he needed. Public school classrooms were too big and distracting, and the work was too repetitive to hold his interest.

Mantilla, who lives in Kendall, thought homeschooling would be too expensive — until her son won a $10,000 scholarship from the state as part of a new program for children with special needs. The money can be used for homeschooling materials, as well as tutoring, private-school tuition and various types of therapies.

"I was like, oh my gosh, this is perfect," Mantilla said. "Our income is very limited. A lot of the resources are expensive."

Just five months after winning approval from state lawmakers, the Personal Learning Scholarship Account program is becoming a reality for families across Florida. Last week, the state Board of Education approved new

*TURN TO SCHOLARSHIPS, 2A*
Union, PTA fight state program for special-needs kids

Children who are enrolled in public schools are not eligible to participate.

**$10,000 SCHOLARSHIP**

The scholarships are worth at least $10,000 each, and can also be put into a prepaid college tuition account.

The state has budgeted $84.4 million for the program this year, meaning about 1,800 scholarships will be awarded. So far, more than 3,700 parents have started applications, said Doug Tuthill, whose nonprofit group Step Up for Students oversees the scholarships.

“Despite all the unknowns of a new program and having a short time line, everyone has come together,” he said.

The parents of children who receive the scholarships will not get the cash up front. Instead, they will be reimbursed for expenditures that fit the criteria. The program will begin cutting checks next month, Tuthill said.

Families are already planning how to spend their share.

Mary Kurnik, of Tampa, said the award would make a huge difference for her 12-year-old son John. She wants to use the money to defray the cost of math tutoring and for Applied Behavior Analysis therapy, a costly technique used to help kids with autism.

She is considering speech therapy, too.

“The co-pays have been very expensive,” she said. “This will take some of the stress and strain off the family budget.”

The Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts program has come a long way since it was first proposed in the Legislature.

The bill was a top priority for the Foundation for Florida’s Future, the influential think tank founded by former Gov. Jeb Bush. But the statewide PTA and teachers’ union opposed the concept, saying children with special needs would be better-served in public schools, which have accountability measures.

The controversial proposal never received a vote on the Senate floor. On the second-to-last day of the legislative session, the language was stuck into a sweeping education bill that also expanded a separate school voucher program. That bill passed with little public input.

In July, the Florida Education Association filed a legal challenge to the way the bill became law. As the fight intensified, both sides accused the other of using special-needs children as props.

A judge dismissed the case late last month, saying the teacher who named as the plaintiff did not have legal standing to bring the lawsuit. Tuthill, the program’s administrator, said he hopes the controversy will die down.

“People got caught up in the policy drama and forgot there are real human beings involved in this debate,” he said.

Those “real human beings” include Armando Mantilla, the 10-year-old Kendall boy who is now being homeschooled.

**FLEXIBLE SCHEDULE**

For Armando, traditional school was a challenge. Having multiple teachers and classes of more than 30 students meant less one-on-one instruction. And though he quickly learned math and science, he couldn’t focus on long worksheets that quizzed the same concepts over and over.

“Often I would get behind because there’s like 26 questions each page,” Armando said.

At home, Armando is teaching himself geometry and biology — subjects many kids don’t tackle until high school. He can start and stop lessons whenever he wants, which has been helpful since Armando doesn’t have a regular sleeping pattern, his mom said.

The flexible schedule also allows Mantilla to fit in the many visits to doctors that Armando needs for severe allergies and other medical issues, as well as therapy sessions to learn social and other skills.

Mantilla knows she wants to provide more for her son — he is having problems with algebra and could use a tutor — but she has to wait until the scholarship money starts flowing.

“If I knew that I had the money for sure and I knew exactly what I could be using it for, I could be doing more,” Mantilla said.