Accounts open school options

BY ERIN KOURKOUNIS
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TAMPA — John Kurnik, a 12-year-old home-school student, studies nature in the park, composes papers on the computer in his game room, and attends weekly gatherings with other kids.

The Tampa seventh-grader has autism and auditory processing disorder, and according to his parents John and Mary Kurnik, he learns best in the comfort of his home.

But it can expensive replicating a schoolhouse, so the Kurniks are welcoming a new state scholarship program for special-needs students that helps with costs that might include private school tuition, therapy and tutoring, as well as art supplies, textbooks and computer programs.

They can even use it for a pre-paid college fund.

“It’s hard to put into words what it means to us,” Mary Kurnik said. “It’s a gift that was dropped from heaven. It’s really expensive parenting a special-needs child. It opened up a lot of avenues for us.”

The Kurnik family has received one of the 1,200 scholarships worth roughly $10,000 each to be awarded this school year through the state’s Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts program. Lawmakers set aside $18.4 million to cover the scholarships in the first year.

About 600 of the recipients, including the Kurniks, recently got the OK to tap into their accounts. The rest will gain access soon.

Here’s how it works: Once a service or product has been authorized, parents will pay directly, submit a receipt and get reimbursement, either through direct-deposit accounts or checks. Parents can track invoices and payments electronically. Money that isn’t used will roll over to next school year.

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Mary Kurnick, mother of a special-needs child who received a state scholarship

Money offers help for special-needs students who can’t thrive in public schools
Scholarships

The program “allows families to customize their child’s education,” said Patrick Gibbons, a spokesman for Step Up for Students, the Tampa-based organization that administers the accounts. “So if the school doesn’t provide enough therapies, the parents have the resources to seek more. Parents can even mix and match different types of services, it really goes beyond school choice.”

Step Up for Students is the same organization that administers the state’s tax-credit scholarships for low-income students to attend private school.

Both programs have come under fire in a lawsuit backed by the statewide teachers union.

In July, a Lee County teacher filed suit over an education bill — Senate Bill 830 — that included an expansion of the tax-credit scholarship program and the creation of the accounts for special-needs students.

The suit claimed that the bill, signed into law by Gov. Rick Scott in June, violates the Constitution because it “log-rolled” multiple education initiatives into one law.

Last month, a Leon County judge dismissed the lawsuit, ruling that the teacher didn’t have the legal right to file it because he couldn’t show he had been harmed by the law.

The Florida Education Association filed an amendment last month, adding several parents as plaintiffs. The outcome is yet to be seen.

Hillsborough Classroom Teachers Association Executive Director Stephanie Baxter-Jenkins said the local teachers union supports the FEA’s position in the lawsuit and opposes the expansion of the Tax Credit Scholarship Program because it is “simply a funneling of public money outside of the public school system.”

The program provides tax breaks to companies donating money to nonprofit entities that pay for children to go to private schools. More than 60,000 Florida students are attending private schools on the scholarships this year.

Still, Baxter-Jenkins said she recognizes that public school may not always be the best option for the families of special-needs students.

“Obviously, we want the best education for all kids and there are certain unique circumstances that may be better fulfilled outside of the system in a different manner,” she said.

Florida’s program is similar to one began in Arizona in 2011.

The Arizona Empowerment Scholarships are offered to special-needs students, those who attend the lowest-rated schools, military dependents and foster children. They are administered by the state’s department of education.

The Florida and Arizona account programs are the only two of their kind in the country, said Matthew Ladner, a research and policy advisor for Jeb Bush’s Foundation for Excellence in Education who helped pioneer the concept in Arizona.

“Every child has unique needs, strengths and weaknesses,” Ladner said. “What this is allowing us to do is more of an a la carte approach. It puts parents completely in control of that process right down to the last dime.”

“It’s so very disconcerting to see the sort of end-of-the-world rhetoric you see about these choice programs.” Ladner said, referring to critics of private school voucher programs.

“This doesn’t need to be about public school or private school. The new paradigm is, ‘How can I provide the best possible education for this particular child?’”

In Florida, the exact amount of each student’s account depends on several factors, including the grade the student is in and county of residence.

Hillsborough students in kindergarten through third grade will receive a scholarship worth $10,409. That amount is $10,009 for students in grades four through eight, and $9,777 for students in ninth through 12th grades.

Students in kindergarten through 12th grade are eligible provided they have an individudal education plan or have been diagnosed with one of eight disabilities — autism, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, Prader-Willi syndrome, Spina bifida, Williams syndrome or intellectual disabilities. They cannot be enrolled in public school and they can not be recipients of the McKay Scholarship, which enables students with disabilities to attend the public or private school of their choice.

The Kurniks are still researching their options for how to get the funds to count.

“We want to use the money carefully, be good stewards of it,” Mary Kurnik said. “We’re still feeling our way through it.”

Mary Kurnik, a former legal assistant with a degree in English education, is a stay-at-home mom who home-schools John and his 14-year-old sister, Krys- tyn. Her husband is a professor at St. Petersburg College. They hope to put some of the money toward speech therapy for John.

“One of the most wonderful things is that home-schoolers are included in this,” Mary Kurnik said. “That’s just huge.”

Dorothy Famiano, a freelance photographer and writer who lives in Brooksville, received accounts for two of her five children — 13-year-old Nicholas, who has spina bifida and is in a wheelchair, and 11-year-old Danielle, who has autism.

Famiano, a single parent, hopes to put the scholarship money toward tutoring for Danielle, therapy for Nicholas and Pads for both kids.

Danielle, Nicholas and their 10-year-old brother — who also has special needs — learn through a concept called “unschooling,” a type of home-schooling that puts children in charge of their own education.

Famiano registered them through Florida Unschoolers, which is technically a private school.

To Famiano, the scholarships are a “godsend.”

“There are things the children need I just can’t afford and the public-school system won’t provide,” Famiano said. She called the program “a chance to give these kids the opportunity to reach their full learning potential. It’s new, it’s cutting edge and I believe it will work.”

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