State's new scholarships for disabled kids thrill parents

BY LESLIE POSSAL | Staff Writer

In public school, Jen Goodwin's 11-year-old son, who has Asperger's syndrome, made solid academic gains but struggled with a "loud and overwhelming" campus. In a smaller private school, the boy thrived socially but started to lose ground academically.

His parents decided last year that the boy -- who has other medical problems, too -- would do best at home, working with private tutors and therapists. It's worked but been costly, at $50 or more an hour for therapy.

So Goodwin was thrilled to learn Florida had created a special scholarship to provide families like hers with cash to cover those costs.

Her family is one of more than 1,600 who have applied since the application process kicked off July 18. The state estimates about 1,800 families will get the money this year, an average of $10,000 each.

"This is an amazing investment in our son and in other kids like him," said the Orlando mother.

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But the new program debuts amid controversy, with a lawsuit questioning the legality of its creation. The Florida Education Association, which filed the suit, said the Legislature approved the law in a “smokey” way that violated the state’s constitution.

The program aims to give parents the ability to tailor an educational plan to meet the needs of their children with severe disabilities.

The Personal Learning Scholarship Account creates savings accounts parents can tap if their child is not in public school or using another state-funded scholarship. The money can pay for therapy, private school or other education services.

It differs from the McKay Scholarship program, also for disabled kids, because only children with certain, more-severe disabilities can apply and the money can be used for home schooling and therapy as well as private-school tuition. The McKay voucher can only be used for private school.

Cynthia Varv, who lives in Easton, already has applied for her daughter Clarissa, 15, who has Down syndrome.

Clarissa was in public school in Lake County for the elementary grades and is now using a McKay scholarship to attend private school. Neither provided all the therapy her mother thinks she needs.

“With the scholarship, I’ll be able to restart that for her,” Varv said.

Joanne McCrady is vice president of the teachers union and also a speech-language pathologist. She understands parents’ concern that their children aren’t always getting all the therapy they need in public school.

But she said the Legislature could solve that problem without a new voucher program.

“That all has to do with funding,” she said. “If we’re funding our schools appropriately, you could have enough people on staff to meet the needs of the students.”

The union’s lawsuit, filed July 16, argues that the law violates the state constitution’s single-subject requirement for bills. The law was passed after lawmakers ticked on to an existing bill a 14-page amendment that expanded a voucher program for low-income students to attend private schools and created the new scholarship program.

The lawsuit did not challenge the program itself, but the union worries the new scholarships do not include enough oversight to make sure the $18.4 million set aside for it is well-spent.

Advocates of the new program called the lawsuit an attack on vulnerable children. Sen. Andy Gardiner, R-Orlando, whose son has Down syndrome and who championed the new law, lambasted the “union bosses” who he said failed to understand how it would help families “who daily face significant life challenges.”

Julie Kieffel knows those challenges well and testified in favor of the program when lawmakers debated it this spring.

She is also one of six parents who this week asked a judge to let them become party to the education-association lawsuit, so they can argue on behalf of the new scholarships.

Her daughter, Faith, 7, has Down syndrome. Faith started pre-K at a Seminole County elementary school. But her mother found the school couldn’t give Faith enough intensive speech therapy, though the girl has problems speaking clearly enough for others to understand her.

“If we could have made that work, it was five minutes from my house ... I would have absolutely been the president of the PTA,” Kieffel said. “It just wasn’t a fit.”

Kieffel, a single parent since her husband died when Faith was a baby, now pays for a private teacher to educate her daughter at home and for twice-a-week, hour-long therapy sessions.

She was “ecstatic” when she heard Gov. Rick Scott had signed into law a program that will help pay for “customized education” her daughter needs.

“We call it special needs because it is special,” she said.

“We have unique needs.”

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