Bill would aid special-needs students

It would offer parents money to us as they see fit

BY JEFF SCHWEERS
Tribune/Naples Daily News
Capital Bureau

TALLAHASSEE — Amid the dozens of school choice bills filed for the upcoming legislative session, one that aims to expand a program for the parents of children with disabilities is on a fast track for early approval. The bill would increase by 37 percent the amount of scholarship money thousands of parents of children with special learning needs could spend on private school tuition, diagnostics, therapeutic services, curriculum and materials.

It has passed through all its major committees and is on the second-reading calendar, which means it is positioned for a vote of the full Senate at the beginning of the session, which starts Jan. 12.

“My hope is this will be on the floor the first week of session for a vote,” Sen. Don Gaetz, R-Destin, the bill’s sponsor, said by telephone Thursday.

The bill would make the Personal Learning Spending Account program permanent in Florida and allocate $73 million toward about 7,300 scholarships. That would be a $20 million increase over funding the program got in the current budget cycle, which was almost three times the initial amount of $18.7 million.

The bill has the support of Senate President Andy Gardiner, R-Orlando, who has a child with Down syndrome and spearheaded creation of the Personal Learning Spending Account program two years ago. It’s aim is to give parents with children who have what he calls unique abilities control over determining their child’s education.

“It’s important because there are thousands of families who are now taking advantage of the personal learning scholarship accounts,” Gaetz said.

About 4,300 students were enrolled through Step Up For Students and the AAA Scholarship Foundation.

“The expectation is that if we place the scholarship in as a permanent statute the number will be about 7,300 next year,” Gaetz said.

Before the program, students with intellectual disabilities had few options, Gaetz said. “The public school system in many places tried very hard to accommodate students with disabilities,” he said. “Sometimes they worked and sometimes they didn’t. But basically students with disabilities had to fit into the offerings of those public school systems.”

The program gives parents whose children meet at least one of nine categories of disability an average of $10,000 to spend on their child’s education as they see fit, either by paying for private school tuition and fees or by purchasing educational materials and developing a program tailored to their needs.

Hillsborough County resident Stephanie Willson has had her son N.” enrolled in the program for two years. She told a Senate subcommittee that she used the money to provide a customized education program for Noel, 9, who has Down syndrome.

At age 3, he entered the early exceptional learners program offered by Hillsborough County public schools. A McKay Scholarship paid for private school before his parents pulled him out of that program and tried home-schooling before placing him back in public schools.

“We’ve been back and forth a little and never had our right fit,” Willson said. The PLSA gave her the freedom of choice to develop a curriculum tailored to Noel’s needs that allows her to home-school her son again.

“I appreciate the work of the public schools, but there is no one size fits all,” she said. “The PLSA allows my child to maximize his potential.”

The only concern school districts might have is if they are asked to provide diagnostic services or develop an individualized education plan, or IEP, for the students without compensation, said Jeff Eakins, superintendent of schools for Hillsborough County.

“Typically students already have a pre-diagnosis or already have been in the school system and already have an IEP, so there is not too much of a burden,” Eakins said. “We just have to be fully aware of what the possibility would be.”

The school district provides a gamut of programs and services for students with special needs, Eakins said, but he supports parental choice.

“We definitely want to meet the needs of all our students, and this provides another option for parents, especially if they want to consider home-schooling,” Eakins said.

About 380 students in Hillsborough, Pasco and Pinellas counties now are enrolled in the PLSA program through Step Up For Students.

“Most parents — about 75 percent — are using the money to attend a private school they think will work better for them,” said Jon East, vice president for policy and public affairs for Step Up For Students.

The bill also takes last year’s proviso language and makes it permanent, expands and clarifies the definition of autism and permanently expands the program to include 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds, East said.

The program is the ultimate in education customization for parents of students who have one of nine designated disabilities, he said. “We say, ‘Here is your money; here is your $10,000. Spend it as you see fit. Choose a school if you want, a therapeutic service, buy a curriculum that fits your student’s needs.’” East said.

Gaetz’s bill also would establish a path to creating postsecondary education programs for students with special education needs beyond 12th grade, another important issue for Gardiner.

“When these kids age out of the public school system too often that is the end of their education and training,” Gaetz said. “Sometimes they wind up back at home sitting in their parents’ house with no job or marginal employment.”

If approved, it would create a way for colleges and universities to offer a Florida Postsecondary Comprehensive Transition Program for students with disabilities and a statewide clearinghouse with information for parents. It comes with an $8 million allocation — $1.5 million to create the statewide center, $3 million for startup and enhancement grants and $3.5 million for scholarships.

It would help create programs similar to one started last year with 80 young adults enrolled at Pensacola State College, Gaetz said.

The bill also would permanently enshrine in statute a House initiative approved on a smaller scale last year to give public school districts and charter schools financial incentives to mandate school uniforms or uniform dress code requirements.

The Tampa Tribune

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