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Lawmakers Poised to Pass Gardiner's 'Unique Abilities' Priorities

By Margie Menzel

TALLAHASSEE, January 6, 2016.....As Senate President Andy Gardiner enters his final legislative session, the House and Senate are poised to quickly pass bills aimed at boosting educational and job opportunities for people with developmental disabilities --- Gardiner's signature passion as a lawmaker.

The bills would expand scholarships for students with disabilities --- whether in pre-kindergarten, K-12 or postsecondary programs --- and offer financial-literacy training. Also, the proposals would encourage businesses and state agencies to hire people with disabilities and create a clearinghouse of information for families.

Gardiner, an Orlando Republican whose son has Down syndrome, describes people with developmental disabilities as having "unique abilities," and has made a priority of seeking changes to help them, especially children.

"So much of what we've worked on has come from other parents and families that say, 'Boy, I'd really love my child to be in a regular classroom, or to get a high-school diploma, a regular diploma,'" Gardiner said. "Or --- what we hope to pass the first week and actually send to the governor --- a bill that has postsecondary options for children with unique abilities."

A similar legislative package was part of a work plan put together by Gardiner and House Speaker Steve Crisafulli for the 2015 session, but most of those bills died when the House adjourned three days early. The 2016 session starts Tuesday.

Both leaders say they expect the House and Senate to take up the "unique abilities" legislation --- along with a water-policy proposal closely identified with Crisafulli --- early in the session.

"It's still on track to pass early, but not in week one," House Education Appropriations Chairman Erik Fresen, a Miami Republican who is sponsoring one of the bills, wrote in a text Wednesday. "I'd say no later than week three."

Fresen's bill (HB 7011) and a Senate version (SB 672), sponsored by Senate Education Appropriations Chairman Don Gaetz, R-Niceville, address changes in what is known as the "Personal Learning Scholarship Account Program."

The scholarships are for K-12 students with disabilities and can be used in a wide variety of ways, such as for instructional materials, school enrollment and tuition and Florida Prepaid College Program contributions. The

program was created in 2014 and expanded in 2015 to include students on the autism spectrum and those with muscular dystrophy. But the expansion was for only one year. The Gaetz and Fresen bills would make the expansion permanent.

The bills also would create the Florida Postsecondary Comprehensive Transition Program, which would help students with intellectual disabilities move from the K-12 education system to postsecondary institutions.

Debra Dowds, executive director of the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council, said a version of the transition program, Project Achieve, already has helped students with disabilities at Florida State College at Jacksonville.

"They are actually participating in the certificate programs, along with students without disabilities, and earning certificates in areas where they have a much better chance of getting a job," Dowds said. The certificates are in areas such as automotive, woodworking and cosmetology --- "things where you can actually learn a trade. ... This is a chance to enhance to preparation of a student so that they can work and they can live independently."

That is Gardiner's hope. His family wouldn't be eligible to participate in such a program, he said, "but we know families that do, and it's changed their lives."

He and his wife, Camille, who helped found the Down Syndrome Foundation of Florida, did not learn of their son's condition until the day Andrew was born 11 years ago.

"I had no clue what we were getting into," Gardiner said. "Especially as a father --- you know, a mom's instincts kick in immediately, but a father starts thinking, 'What are they going to do when I'm not here?' or 'What are they going to do when they're 25? Or 30?' "

Other bills in the "unique abilities" package include a measure (SB 388), filed by Sen. Nancy Detert, R-Venice, that would create a program to recognize businesses that employ people with developmental disabilities. The House version (HB 7003) by Rep. Matt Caldwell, R-North Fort Myers, overlaps with a proposal (SB 376), filed by Sen. Dorothy Hukill, R-Port Orange, that would create a financial literacy program for people with developmental disabilities.

Caldwell's bill also overlaps with a Senate proposal (SB 7010), filed by Sen. Jeremy Ring, D-Margate, that

would seek to build a long-term commitment by state agencies and organizations to improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

Gardiner sees the measures as the logical step following his 2013 legislation to eliminate so-called "special diplomas" and require schools to include students with disabilities in regular classrooms in meaningful ways.

"Because that was another thing we heard from parents: 'Yeah, my kid goes to the local elementary, but they're not in the room. They're brought in for art and then they're taken back to a secluded location,'" he recalled. "We said to school districts, 'You can't give a special diploma that means nothing anymore. You have to educate these kids. You have to give them a path to getting a regular diploma.'"

Now some of the students are ready for postsecondary

education, Gardiner said. He told of a woman who sent Camille Gardiner a message after dropping her daughter off at the University of Central Florida.

"There are eight individuals with unique abilities that are going to school there now," he said. "And Camille got a message from a mom who essentially said, 'I just dropped my daughter off at the University of Central Florida, and I cried the whole way home. I never thought in my life I'd be dropping my daughter off at any institution like that.'"

Now, as his legislative career winds to a close, Gardiner is determined that more families will know such moments.

"Hopefully, someone will pick up the mantle after I'm gone," he said. "But while I'm here, we're going to focus on it."