

Bill to expand school choice gives parents more control over their kid's education

By Olivia Huron-Schaeffer



Olivia Huron-Schaeffer 's family has taken advantage of Florida school choice programs. They live in north Brevard County.

My 15-year-old son David is on the autism spectrum and for six years he has benefitted from a popular state program called the Gardiner Scholarship. The Gardiner Scholarship is a flexible spending account that allows parents to mix and match materials and services – tuition, tutors, technology, curriculum, etc. – to create exactly the right education program for their child.

Back in public school, David fell through the cracks. He was held to low expectations and never received the services he was entitled to under law. But with a Gardiner Scholarship, I've had the resources to home-school him, and now he is learning and thriving in a way I never thought possible.

I wish the same thing were available for my other kids, and I know other parents do too.

This year, it might happen.

State lawmakers are set to consider a bill that would turn the state's school choice scholarships into flexible spending scholarships. There are thousands of Gardiner parents like me who know what a life changer this would be for families all over Florida.

We are a one-income family, so money is tight. I'm a

stay-at-home mom. My husband is an associate pastor. For several years, my other three kids – Abigail, Alysia and Daniel – used the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship for low-income families to attend a school we loved in Melbourne. But when my husband lost his job, we had to move to north Brevard County, and we could not find a school we thought was the right fit.

So, we said goodbye to the scholarships and I became a home-school mom. I was terrified at first. But without the pressures and distractions of school, my kids learned more. For example, if there was a concept my kids weren't getting, we'd pause and focus until they did.

I think it says a lot about the quality of home education that Abigail started college last fall. I am so proud of her, and I'm proud of my whole family for this education adventure we're on. But it's also true I can't give my kids, besides David, the education they deserve.

Thanks to the Gardiner Scholarship, David has a reading tutor. He has a microscope, a dissection kit and a plant tower to supplement his science lessons. He has a special hammock that allows him to relax when he's stressed out. Without the Gardiner, David wouldn't have any of these things.

My other kids just have to make do. When we first started home schooling, all four had to share two very old, hand-me-down computers. I had to settle for a curriculum I knew was of lesser quality, because that's all we could afford. Daniel could use a reading tutor, too, but since that's out of the question, I have him hang out in the corner when David is learning online from his tutor.

It doesn't have to be this way. In the wake of the pandemic, parents across America pulled their kids out of school to start home schools and micro-schools called "pandemic pods." Some were worried about safety of in-person learning. Some were worried about quality of online instruction. I love their can-do spirit, and their willingness to do whatever it takes for their kids.

But those kinds of opportunities shouldn't be limited to wealthier parents. Parents without as much money are just as capable of creating quality learning environments for their kids. And if more of them had control over their kid's education funds, that's exactly what they'd do.

Olivia Huron-Schaeffer lives in Brevard County.