



## 2021-22 Legislative Updates to the Former Gardiner Scholarship Webinar Participant Questions

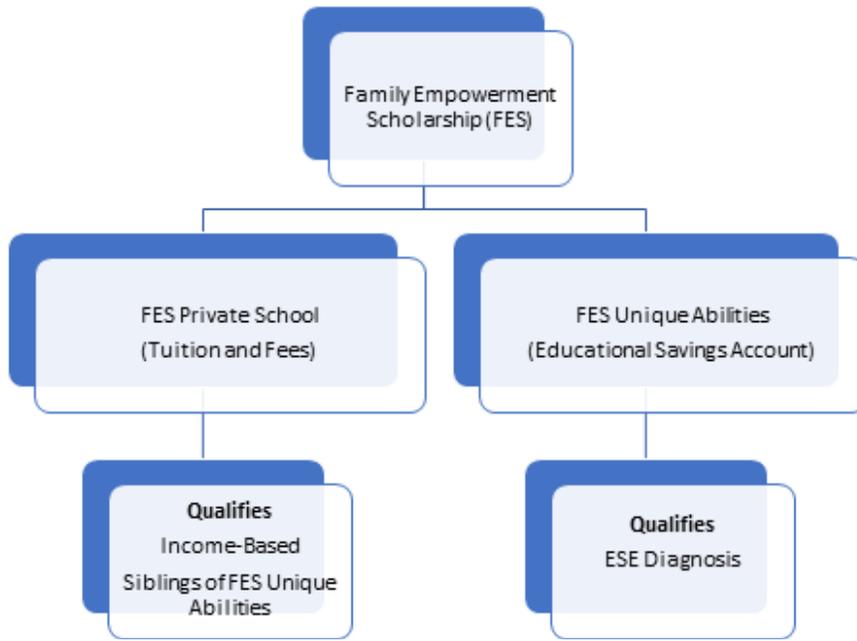
On July 1, 2021 the **Family Empowerment Scholarship (FES)** merged with the Gardiner Scholarship and new eligibilities were added. A list of these changes can be viewed online [here](#).

The FES will have two variations, one for income-based applicants and the other for students with unique abilities (special needs).

The income-based scholarship is known as the **Family Empowerment Scholarship for Educational Options (FES EO or FES for Educational Options)**. This scholarship will be a traditional scholarship, limited mostly to tuition and fees. See the PARENT HANDBOOK [here](#) for more information.

The Gardiner Scholarship is now the **Family Empowerment Scholarship for Students with Unique Abilities (or FES formerly Gardiner)**. This scholarship for students with unique abilities is known as an **Educational Savings Account (ESA)** and functions like a bank account where you can withdraw funds to pay for your child's education, including Tuition/Fees for Private School or Homeschooling, textbooks, tutoring, therapies and more. Currently, this scholarship is only for students with specific diagnosis. SEE THE PARENT HANDBOOK [here](#) for more info. Check out our list of additional Frequently Asked Questions [here](#). Students on the McKay Scholarship in 2021-22 will be eligible for the ESA style scholarship when the program merges with FES in 2022-23.

The **Florida Tax Credit Scholarship (FTC)** remains unchanged from previous years. Like the FES for Educational Options, the FTC program is a traditional scholarship where funds are used to pay for tuition and fees at approved private schools. Both the FES for Educational Options and FTC programs are income-based scholarships and both scholarships are covered on one application. See the PARENT HANDBOOK [here](#) for more information. Check out our list of Frequently Asked Questions [here](#).



## Eligibility Requirements, Application & NEW Diagnosis

Which scholarship should I apply for? Both FES Unique Abilities and McKay will receive the same award amounts this year. The chart explains the differences. Families can apply for both and decide which one they want once applications are reviewed.

Point of Interest	FES (Formerly Gardiner)	McKay
Child must have a defined disability	Yes	Yes
Family can receive while child is enrolled in public school	Yes	Yes
Child must have been enrolled in public school the year before application	No	Yes
Child must have an IEP or 504 Accommodation Plan	No	Yes
Family can receive while child enrolled in private school	Yes	Yes
Family can receive if child is homeschooled	Yes	No
Funds can be used for private school tuition	Yes	Yes
Funds can be used for therapy, instructional materials, tutoring and more	Yes	No

### DOES MY CHILD QUALIFY?

The FES for Students with Unique Abilities (formerly Gardiner) scholarship is for Florida students 3 years old through 12th grade or age 22, whichever comes first, with one of these diagnoses.

## DOES MY CHILD QUALIFY?

# Eligibility Requirements

This scholarship is for Florida students 3 years old through 12th grade or age 22, whichever comes first, with one of the following diagnoses:

- Anaphylaxis
- Autism spectrum disorder
- Being a high-risk child
- Cerebral Palsy
- Down syndrome
- Emotional or a behavioral disability
- Hearing impairment, including deafness
- Hospital or homebound
- Identification as dual sensory impaired
- Intellectual disability
- Language impairment
- Muscular dystrophy
- Orthopedic impairment
- Other health impairment
- Phelan-McDermid syndrome
- Prader-Willi syndrome
- Rare diseases
- Specific learning disability
- Speech impairment
- Spina bifida
- Traumatic brain injury
- Visual impairment, including blindness
- Williams syndrome

### Age requirements:

- Students must be at least 3 or 4 on or before Sept 1.
- Students entering kindergarten must be 5 on or before Sept 1.
- Students entering first grade must be 6 on or before Sept 1.

### Some categories cover a wide range of eligible diagnoses:

A **specific learning disability** is defined as a disorder in one or more of the basic learning processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest in significant difficulties affecting the ability to listen, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematics. Associated conditions may include, but are not limited to, dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, or developmental aphasia. A specific learning disability does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of a visual, hearing, motor, intellectual, or emotional/behavioral disability, limited English proficiency, or environmental, cultural, or economic factors.

This definition is found in State Board of Education Rule 6A-6.03018, F.A.C. Learn more about specific learning disabilities from the Florida Department of Education [here](#).

**Other health impairment** means having limited strength, vitality or alertness, including a heightened alertness to environmental stimuli, that results in limited alertness with respect to the educational environment, that is due to chronic or acute health problems. This includes, but is not limited to, asthma, attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, Tourette syndrome, diabetes, epilepsy, a heart condition, hemophilia, lead poisoning, leukemia, nephritis, rheumatic fever, sickle cell anemia, and acquired brain injury. This definition is found in State Board of Education Rule, Florida Administrative Code (F.A.C.).

To learn more about other health impairments visit the Florida Department of Education [here](#).

**Are you still accepting applications?** Yes, and tell your friends!

**How do I apply?** You can apply [here](#).

**You need these documents to complete your application:** *Proof of residency, birth certificate, IEP or Doctors Diagnosis with one of the qualifying disabilities, and Sworn Compliance statement (which no longer needs to be notarized)*

### **What is the process for applying and the different status notifications?**

**Pending** – means your application was received and will be reviewed. This typically takes 1-3 weeks.

**On Hold** – this means there are some documents needed from the parent

**Denied** – your child does not meet the requirements for the scholarship.

**Awarded or Eligible for Award**– SUFS has determined eligibility and a **preliminary** award amount will be communicated based on the information submitted. This is the time when a parent that has a child currently enrolled in public school or on another scholarship such as McKay, VPK, Tax-Credit Scholarship needs to decide which option they wish to use and drop all others.

At this stage we have found the student **conditionally eligible**, but the Florida Department of Education (DOE) needs to complete a “cross check” to determine final eligibility. The “**cross check**” is a process where the DOE confirms the student is NOT enrolled in a public school (including charter school and Florida Virtual School) and is not receiving another scholarship. Final Matrix funding will be determined at this time and may change the amount allocated from the parent award letter. This funding information is due to SUFS on the quarterly dates.

Parents and guardians should take the **award letter** to a private school of their choice and **enroll the student**. Private schools will need to notify Step Up that your child is enrolled by August 1, in order to receive the full scholarship value.

**Funded** – This status is determined after the DOE Cross check. Funding indicates that funds have been placed in your child’s account.

**Withdrawn Funds Returned to DOE** – this indicates that the child was found enrolled in public school. The parent will be contacted by SUFS to determine parents’ option and application will be updated.

**Waitlist** - this means that there are no more scholarships available at this time, and your child will be placed on a waitlist to receive funding as soon as they are available. This could happen during the school year or be a second priority for the following school year. SUFS is not able to tell parents where they are on the waitlist.

### **How do I add a sibling with a qualifying disability onto my account?**

*If the sibling has a qualifying disability, they can be added to the other siblings’ application. If you have already received an “awarded” status with one child and are now adding another child, you will need to call (1-877-735-7837) or email [FES-Gardiner@sufs.org](mailto:FES-Gardiner@sufs.org) and have that child added. If you are applying for the first time, you will be able to add all children to the one application. Please include the following information:*

- Student’s Full Name
- DOB

- *Social Security #*
- *Relationship to Parent (Son/Daughter)*
- *Grade Level as of 8/21/21*
- *Gender*
- *Attended public school in 20/21 - Yes or No*
- *County school is in*
- *Ethnicity*
- *Race*

**Is there a requirement for my child to have been in a public school the prior year in order to qualify for the scholarship?** The new legislation eliminated the prior public-school requirement for the FES scholarships, but it is still a requirement for McKay for the 21-22 school year only. That requirement will sunset for McKay in the 22-23 school year.

### **Questions About Sibling Scholarships:**

Once a child has been awarded either of the FES scholarship options, that student's siblings also become eligible for the FES private school scholarship option. Learn more about applying for a sibling scholarship [here](#).

#### **How do I add a sibling with a qualifying disability onto my account?**

*If the sibling has a qualifying disability, they can be added to the other siblings' application. If you have already received an "awarded" status with one child and are now adding another child, you will need to call (1-877-735-7837) or email [FES-Gardiner@sufs.org](mailto:FES-Gardiner@sufs.org) and have that child added. If you are applying for the first time, you will be able to add all children to the one application. Please include the following information:*

- *Student's Full Name*
- *DOB*
- *Social Security #*
- *Relationship to Parent (Son/Daughter)*
- *Grade Level as of 8/21/21*
- *Gender*
- *Attended public school in 20/21 - Yes or No*
- *County school is in*
- *Ethnicity*
- *Race*

**Can a sibling receive a scholarship if they do not have an eligible diagnosis?** Yes, siblings who do NOT have a Unique Ability diagnosis can receive the FES Income-based scholarship. The family DOES NOT have to qualify based on income, but the student must meet the age and grade requirements.

They must be entering kindergarten and must be age 5 by Sept 1. That scholarship can **only** be used to pay private school tuition and fees at an approved participating private school. The FES scholarship for private school cannot be used for homeschooling students, including students enrolled in the Umbrella

School as it has not been approved by FLDOE to enroll students on the scholarship. Directions to apply for a sibling scholarship are [here](#).

**Why is it called “income-based” if the income doesn’t matter for siblings? Will that be changed in the future?** The term “income-based” is temporarily describing the part of the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Educational Options that is used for private school tuition and fees because this part of the program has traditionally required students to qualify based on income. For the 2021-22 school year, students may now also qualify for the FES for private school tuition and fees as siblings of students who receive the Family Empowerment Scholarship for Students with Unique Abilities.

**When do we apply for the siblings?** Applications opened July 1, 2021.

**Do we have to include our income for the sibling applying with the FES Income-based scholarship?** No, you can skip that part, but the information does help us when we analyze the program.

**If we add a sibling, will we see them on the same parent account?** If the sibling has a diagnosis that qualifies them for the FES for Students with Special Needs (formerly Gardiner) that student can be added to the current application. If the sibling does not have qualifying diagnosis you will need to complete a new application for the FES for Educational Options (the income-based scholarship) [GO HERE](#) for that application. You do not need to income qualify to apply with a sibling of an FES student.

**Can we get reimbursed for a sibling at a private school we already paid for four years up front?** No, the scholarship cannot pay for tuition, or any materials acquired, prior to the school year in which you applied.

**If a sibling qualifies for the FES Income-based scholarship, can they also be homeschooled with the other sibling who is on the FES Unique Abilities scholarship?** No, they can only use the funds for private school tuition and associated fees.

**My student with special needs is enrolled in the Umbrella School and is homeschooled. Can I also home school the sibling by enrolling in the Umbrella School?** If the sibling has the FES for Students with Unique Abilities (formerly Gardiner), then yes. If your student does not have a qualifying diagnosis and has the FES for Educational Options (income-based scholarship) then, no. That scholarship must be used to pay for private school tuition and associated fees and the Umbrella School has not been approved by FLDOE to accept scholarship payments.

**At what age is a sibling eligible to apply?** At least age 3 with a qualifying diagnosis. Otherwise, the student must be age 5 by Sept. 1 to apply and be entering grades K-12.

**Will McKay siblings be eligible for the scholarship next year when McKay merges with FES?** Yes, once McKay students become FES students, their siblings will be eligible for a scholarship as well.

**Does the sibling option take away from the FES Unique Abilities funds?** No, it is from a separate pot of money.

**Can the sibling FES Income-Based scholarship be used for online tuition?** Not at this time.

**Can the sibling funds be used to help cover expenses for my child with unique abilities?** No, you cannot use one child’s funds to pay for another child’s needs. If your sibling child does not qualify for the

FES for Students with Unique Abilities, the student will have a traditional non-ESA scholarship that can only be used for private school tuition and fees.

**Can the sibling keep their scholarship if the original student returns to public school or leaves the program?** If the sibling is awarded a scholarship prior to the original student returning to public school then, yes, the sibling may keep their scholarship. The student who returned to public school may apply for a scholarship again in the future under the sibling eligibility rule.

### **Renewals - “Once In, Always In”**

**Do I have to apply for a scholarship each year?** Each year, SUFS requires the parent to “RENEW” their child’s scholarship. You will not need to submit documents again, as there is a “Once In, Always In” clause in place. This is simply a process for you to tell SUFS that you wish to continue to participate in the scholarship.

**What about students labeled “high risk”?** If your student is on the FES for Students with Unique Abilities and enrolled through the diagnosis of “high risk” you will need to apply again with a new eligible diagnosis once they turn age 6.

### **How Can I Spend the Scholarship Funds?**

The **FES for Educational Options scholarship** may be used to pay for tuition, books sold through the school, registration fees, transportation services during school hours, uniforms sold through the school, testing fees, other fees like after school or sports fees, digital devices and internet access sold through the school. You can read more in the PARENT HANDBOOK [here](#).

The **FES for Students with Unique Abilities** (formerly the Gardiner Scholarship) is an ESA and can be used to pay for private school tuition, fees, textbooks, curriculum, therapies, assistive technologies and more. You can read more about the eligible expenses in the PARENT HANDBOOK [here](#).

The **FTC scholarship** may be used to pay for tuition, fees and textbooks or school uniforms if included as part of the school fees. The scholarship can also cover registration, testing, and other fees such as after school and sports fees. FTC students may also enroll in two Florida Virtual School courses free of charge. You can read more in the PARENT HANEDBOOK [here](#).

**Transportation Scholarship:** students will receive \$750 to cover transportation expenses to attend a public school other than the school they were assigned by the district. If you want to know more, you can [click here](#).

### **Frequently Asked Questions about Scholarships for Students with Unique Abilities**

**Do I still have to notarize the sworn compliance statement?** Nope!

**How much will my child receive with the FES Students with Unique Abilities Scholarship?** The Funding is based on a revised formula and can be viewed [here](#). This year, it combines the Matrix levels 251, 252 and 253 into an average amount and students with a 254 or 255 are funded at individual amounts.

Renewal students from the 2020-21 school year will be grandfathered into the old funding formula and will be awarded the higher of the two scholarship amounts.

**When will we receive the funding in our accounts?** The 2021-22 funding will be released quarterly. SUFS will receive funds from the DOE on September 1, November 1, February 1, and April 1. SUFS will deposit funds into scholarship accounts within 2 weeks of those dates.

**Did the funding decrease this year?** Renewal Gardiner students will be “grandfathered in” and will not see a decrease in their scholarship amount from the 2020-2021 school year. Renewal Gardiner students will receive the greater of the new state-calculated formula amount or their previous amount from the 2020-2021 school year. In each future year, the renewal Gardiner students will continue to receive the 2020-2021 scholarship amount, if it is higher. We are monitoring the data for new students and will work with the legislature on any needed improvements.

**Are the “grandfathered” funding levels for this year only?** No. If your funding level is grandfathered in this year, you will get to keep that amount so long as you renew the scholarship each year.

**My child currently has the Gardiner Scholarship. Will we lose funding if the new amounts decrease?** No. Students on the scholarship in the 2020-21 school year will be “grandfathered in” and will be guaranteed the higher of the two amounts for the remainder of their participation in the scholarship.

**Will McKay and FES for Students with Unique Abilities be funded differently?** No, the legislature aligned the two scholarships to be funded at the same levels this year.

**Will our private school be notified directly as to the amount of funds our student receives?** No. The parent will receive this information. The school will not receive any funding information specific to your child.

**I noticed that the funding amount on my Eligibility Letter disappeared. What happened?** Those amounts were removed in anticipation of the new funding amounts.

**If we are not receiving funding until the first two weeks of September and our child has to start school in August, will we have to pay out of pocket for registration and tuition fees for the beginning of the school year?** Each school is different and makes their own policies in regard to registration and tuition/fees. Check with your school to see how they operate. Most schools will work with you once they know you have been approved for a scholarship.

**How do I know what Matrix level my child is at?** Not all students on the scholarship will have a Matrix. These are done at the time of the IEP meeting if in public school. Any student who does not have a Matrix level on file with the FLDOE will be awarded at the average of 251 – 253 funding level, which varies by district and by grade level.

**How do I request a Matrix review?** You will need to contact the Exceptional Student Education department within your local school district. Please note, a Matrix review completed by your local district is final and may cause your funding level to decrease or increase. Please refer to the [Parent Handbook](#) for more information.

**Do evaluations disqualify you from the scholarship?** No. You will only be disqualified if you are considered to be enrolled in a public school. You do not need to be enrolled in a public school to receive an evaluation from your local school district.

**Do private schools work with quarterly tuition payments?** Yes. Private schools can only invoice SUFS on a quarterly basis.

**How do reimbursements work?** When you purchase an item on the pre-approved list, purchase an item you've been pre-authorized to buy, or an item that falls within the categories of legislatively approved expenses (such as classroom supplies, textbooks, tutoring or school tuition) you will upload your receipts through your account, along with a description of the items and educational purposes for your student. The reimbursement must also include the student's first and last name, student ID number, amount of reimbursement and more depending on the type of qualifying purchase. The PARENT HANDBOOK covers this on pages 21-27 [here](#).

Once the purchase is approved, you will receive an ACH transfer from your FES account to your personal bank account to reimburse you. The process takes about 2-3 weeks on average, though during peak times it can take longer.

Please note, cash payments cannot be reimbursed. You will need to use a money order, personal check, cashier's check PayPal or other means of electronic payment.

Please note: reimbursement requests for any items purchased between July 1, 2021 and June 30, 2022 must be received by Step Up by August 31, 2022.

**How do I appeal denied reimbursements? How long does the appeal take?** If your purchase request was denied you are allowed one appeal. You may appeal by submitting the purchase request again and notating in the description box that it is an appeal or reconsideration request.

**Can I be reimbursed for tuition I prepaid last year?** No. You can not be reimbursed on any expenses with current funds on prior year expenses. For example, you cannot use funds received in 2021-22 to pay for expenses incurred in 2020-21.

**I paid for therapies/ instructional materials or other expenses that exceed the quarterly payment. Can I still be reimbursed for the remaining difference?** Yes, you can be reimbursed during future quarter payments during the same school year the expense was made. For example, you receive \$2,500 in the first quarter but spend \$3,000 on therapies. You can be reimbursed \$2,500 during the first quarter and be reimbursed \$500 in the second quarter once the second quarter payment is received.

**Do I have to spend all funds within the quarter?** No. All unspent funds roll over from quarter to quarter and year to year. However, the account will be closed if there are two consecutive years of inactivity.

**I paid all the tuition for this school year upfront. Can I be reimbursed each quarter?** Yes, if you paid the tuition for 2021-22 after July 1, 2021, then you may be reimbursed for the expense each quarter until the expense is paid off or you exhaust funds for the year.

**Can I purchase instructional material that exceeds the cap limitations?** Yes, but you will need to pay the difference out of pocket.

**Can you make exemptions on instructional material spending caps?** Not at this time. You will need to pay the difference out of pocket.

**Reimbursements are currently taking 4+ weeks to process. Will that be streamlined and go faster?**

Reimbursements average around 2-3 weeks, but we do experience high levels of demand from time to time where that process slows down. We do apologize if you're currently experiencing a delay in reimbursements at this time. We do have some tips to make the process faster for you:

Preapproved items are processed much faster. We encourage parents to get a pre-authorization before submitting a reimbursement. We also have a list of items that have already been preapproved. That list can be found [here](#).

Please know we are also working to increase staff and improve staff training so we can scale to meet the growing needs of our new and renewing students.

**How do I submit a preauthorization request?** Check out this short video we made for you [here](#)!

**What is MyScholarShop?** MyScholarShop is Step Up's one stop shop to meet unique needs of your child. This program is currently available to students using the FES for Students with Special Needs. It connects to online catalogues of various vendors like Best Buy and allows parents to purchase instructional materials, textbooks and more directly from the vendor. Your student's account is debited for the purchase amount and you don't have to wait to be reimbursed for your purchase. To learn more about MyScholarShop visit our website [here](#). Also review the PARENT HANDBOOK on pages 29-31 [here](#) for more information on how to purchase items in MyScholarShop.

**Will any new vendors or products be added to MyScholarShop this year?** Yes, we are always happy to add new vendors. Please send your recommendations to us or have your vendor reach out to us [enrollments@sufs.org](mailto:enrollments@sufs.org) or complete vendor and product request form [here](#).

**Can new family's access MyScholarShop once approved and prior to funding?** Yes. You will be able to log into MyScholarShop [here](#).

**Will Step Up be hiring more staff to handle increased call volume?** Step Up employs a call center that automatically scales up with call volumes, however we can only scale up so much at any one time. Early renewal season and late application season, especially with many new eligibilities added this year, are adding to call wait times. You may also reach us through our chat bot at [www.stepupforstudents.org](http://www.stepupforstudents.org) or send us your questions via chat on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) or [Twitter](#) or email us at [fes-gardinerpayments@sufs.org](mailto:fes-gardinerpayments@sufs.org)

**How do I find a Private School in my area?** You can find a school by your zip code on our School Finder tool located [HERE](#).

**How do I know if a Private School will take my scholarship?** The Florida Department of Education houses a Directory of Private Schools [HERE](#) and you can see which schools take each scholarship.

**How does the Public-School Option work?** If your student meets the requirements for the scholarship, they may be able to attend a different public school other than the one they are assigned to. However, they cannot receive scholarship funds if they choose to stay in public school. If you choose to enroll your student with unique abilities in a public school, you may contact your school district's ESE office for additional information on how to use that option.

**Can I use my scholarship to pay for public school?** Yes. FES scholarships for students with special needs may use funds to pay for services or part-time classes at a public school if the school district is willing to do this. However, Family Empowerment Scholarship students (formerly Gardiner) based on special needs cannot attend a public school full time free of charge, just as you can't get more than one scholarship.

**If my child is being evaluated by the public school district, does that disqualify them for the scholarship?** Not if they are not "enrolled" in the public school. Private and homeschool children are able to be evaluated by their local school district without being enrolled.

**Can I apply for multiple scholarships?** Yes, you may apply for any scholarships for which your student qualifies; however, you can only accept one.

**Is there a requirement for my child to have been in a public school the prior year in order to qualify for the scholarship?** The new legislation eliminated the prior public-school requirement for the FES scholarships, but it is still a requirement for McKay for the 21-22 school year only. That requirement will sunset for McKay in the 22-23 school year.

**My student has ADHD and other disabilities not mentioned on the website, do they still qualify?** Yes, a student with an ADHD diagnosis would qualify under the definition of "other health impairment." Some qualifying diagnoses aren't specifically mentioned but are covered under labels like "specific learning disability," "emotional or behavioral disability," or "other health impairment." For a more complete list, refer to the PARENT HANDBOOK pages 36-39, [here](#).

The FLDOE also has additional information. For "other health impairment" see [here](#). For "specific learning disability" see [here](#).

**My student was attending a private school and receiving services from our local public school district. Will I lose the scholarship if my student keeps receiving services?** No. As long as your student is enrolled in the private school, and not a public school, you are entitled to keep the services provided by your local public school.