



S P R E A D I N G T H E N E W S

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Florida families begin using new parental choice scholarship accounts

Families of hundreds of Florida students with significant special needs, including autism, Down syndrome and cerebral palsy, have been given the green light to begin using a new, cutting-edge parental choice scholarship program.

So far, parents of more than 1,200 students have been awarded Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts for the 2014-15 school year. The accounts allow them to access a range of educational services, including private schools, tutors, therapists, curriculum and materials.

Last week, the parents of 616 students were notified that they can begin using the accounts, which are administered by nonprofits such as Step Up For Students. Parents of 298 more are expected to get the same notification in a few weeks.

The PLSA program was passed by the Legislature last spring and signed into law by Gov. Rick Scott on June 20. The scholarships are available to students in kindergarten through 12th grade with one of eight diagnosed disabilities. The state set aside \$18.4 million for the first year of the program – enough for an estimated 1,800 students awarded an average of \$10,000 each. To date, the parents of more than 4,500 students have started applications.

The scholarship accounts allow participating parents and service providers to be reimbursed for a wide range of state-approved educational services and materials. For expenses that are not pre-approved, parents can submit requests for consideration prior to incurring the expense. There is also a payment process for parents with special circumstances who cannot make purchases out of pocket.

Parents and providers can track invoices and payments electronically. Funds that aren't used roll over to the next year. They can continue to be used for education-related expenses until the student graduates from a post-secondary education institution, such as a college or technical institute, or has gone four consecutive years after high school with no further education. At that point, the account is closed and any remaining money reverts to the state.

The application process for the new scholarships opened on July 18, two days after the Florida teachers union filed suit against SB 850, the bill that created the PLSA program. A Leon County circuit judge dismissed the suit on Sept. 24, ruling the plaintiffs did not have standing to bring the case. The teachers union filed an amended complaint on Oct. 22.

Step Up For Students also administers the state's tax credit scholarship program for low-income students. For more information about the PLSA program, visit www.stepupforstudents.org.

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