

T H E P R O M I S E O F
Special Needs Scholarships

Alliance for 
School Choice





www.AllianceForSchoolChoice.org

About Us

The Alliance for School Choice seeks to improve our nation's K-12 education by advancing systemic and sustainable public policy that empowers parents, particularly those in low-income families, to choose the education they determine is best for their children.

A national school choice leader, the Alliance for School Choice, invests in states with the greatest potential for enacting or expanding high-quality, accountable school choice programs. We provide policy and program expertise, implementation strategies and guidance, promote and defend school choice programs, and build local infrastructure for long-term growth, impact, and sustainability.

The Alliance for School Choice publishes an annual *School Choice Yearbook* with the most comprehensive data and information on each of the publicly funded private school choice programs across the country.

Visit www.AllianceForSchoolChoice.org/Yearbook to learn more.



Imagine having a child with special learning needs and watching your child struggle through school, both socially and academically. Schools across the nation have the tools and personnel that allow special needs children to learn and to thrive, but they are often out-of-district public schools or private schools with high tuitions. Imagine knowing that even though your son or daughter would thrive in a private school, bureaucratic regulations prevent you from selecting the best outplacement opportunities for your child. For millions of families across America, this is a painful reality. But thanks to courageous legislators in eight states across the country, educational power is being transferred back to parents.

Children with special needs require a customized education to reach their full potential. While public schools have made significant improvements to special needs education and offer more options, school choice programs put control of choosing the best school and education in the hands of parents.

Over the past 12 years, special needs scholarship programs have been enacted and expanded across the country. The nation's first program began in 1999, when Florida created the John M. McKay Scholarship for Students with Disabilities Program. During the 2011-12 school year, it provided vouchers to nearly 23,000 students. Today, 10 programs in eight states serve nearly 30,000 children with special needs—giving thousands of families educational options that can be specifically tailored to the educational needs of their children.

From scholarship tax credits and vouchers to education savings accounts, different types of programs operate to help families in Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Utah. State legislatures continue to enact and expand school choice for special needs children each year, bringing hope to thousands of families who want to choose a tailored education for their special needs children.

But our words only tell part of the story. The greatest testimony about the promise of special needs scholarships comes from the stories of eight families across the nation — families who share their experiences of participating in special needs scholarship programs. Keep reading to learn how school choice and special needs scholarships have transformed the lives of children.



Arizona's Lexie's Law

Lexie Weck attended preschool and pre-kindergarten in public school. But with autism, cerebral palsy, and mild mental retardation, Lexie was not getting the education her mother thought she needed.

"The public school was babysitting and not safe [for Lexie]," Andrea Weck-Robertson, Lexie's mother, said. "They didn't know where to put her."

With Andrea's parents' help, Lexie was enrolled in private school. Lexie thrived at her new school and became very social. She learned to listen and take direction with sign language. Lexie also learned to use signs herself.

"I didn't know how to be with Lexie," Andrea said. "But now we can communicate."

Worried about paying for private school, Andrea began to advocate for a school choice program for children with special needs in Arizona. Lexie's Law, originally a voucher program that transitioned into a tax credit scholarship program in 2009, now exists in the namesake of Andrea's daughter.

"[Lexie's Law] changed everything for her," Andrea said. "There are little things that meant everything and changed everything for her. I wouldn't have this little girl without this scholarship program."

Lexie's Law

Program Facts

Lexie's Law is a scholarship tax credit program for disabled students and foster care students. In 2009, the program transitioned from a voucher program to a scholarship tax credit program. In the 2011-12 school year, 115 students received scholarships to attend 47 participating schools with donations totaling \$561,029.

Program Type

Corporate scholarship tax credit program for disabled students and foster children

Year Established

2009

Scholarship Cap

- Whichever is less:
 - Tuition of private school
 - 90 percent of the cost to send the child to public school

Student Eligibility

- Students who received vouchers under Arizona's two previous voucher programs receive priority in scholarships
- Attended public school as a full-time student for 100 days prior to the fiscal year
- Students must:
 - Have been placed in foster care at any time before the student graduates from high school or obtains a GED, or
 - Have been identified as having a disability under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, identified by a school district as a student with a disability, or identified as eligible to receive disability services from a school district



Arizona's Empowerment Scholarships Account Program

When Kelly McLemore's son Aaron was diagnosed with autism at age 3, she immediately enrolled him in preschool at the public school. In a self-contained classroom, Aaron struggled every day at school.

"I saw little improvement in his learning and communication," Kelly said.

Aaron did not socialize well with the other students or his teacher. He often had outbursts of anger and was aggressive toward authority figures. Kelly would keep Aaron home several days each week to give the teacher a break.

"My concern," Kelly said, "is that not all kids learn the same; not all disabilities are the same."

Aaron worked with a private speech therapist who recommended Chrysalis Academy for Aaron.

After being enrolled in a summer program at the school, Kelly began to see improvements in Aaron. But Kelly could not afford to pay the more than \$27,000 in tuition for Aaron to attend the school full time.

Hearing a news report about a new school choice program—the education savings account program—Kelly immediately applied. The first parent in the state to submit an application for the program, Kelly was soon approved to participate.

Now in first grade at Chrysalis Academy, Aaron has made significant improvements.

"He's more calm and relaxed," Kelly said. "Aaron is interactive with adults and other kids. He does tasks that are requested of him and is paying attention."

Aaron is able to watch television with his family, play with his three brothers and the dog, and has shown an interest in computers.

"This is what I've been praying for three years," Kelly said. "He can be active and productive in society now."

Empowerment Scholarship Accounts

Program Facts

The Empowerment Scholarship Accounts Program allows eligible students to access an education savings account to provide a tailored education that includes reading, grammar, mathematics, social studies, and science. Funds can be spent on a variety of educational tools, including tuition and fees, textbooks, educational therapies, and tutoring. In 2011-12, 142 students used accounts to access a tailored education.

Program Type

Special needs education savings account

Year Established

2011

Scholarship Cap

- 90 percent of the state funding for each qualified student (takes into account grade and disability)

Student Eligibility

- Identified as a child with a disability under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act; or by a school district, or is eligible to receive special education services from a school district under state law
- Attended public school as a full-time student for 100 days prior to the fiscal year and who transferred to a qualified private school, or participated in the program in the previous year, or received a scholarship under Lexie's Law
- Have an Individualized Education Program (IEP)



Florida's John M. McKay Scholarship for Students with Disabilities

Karin Horanic of Oviedo, Fla., knew something was going on with her 9-month-old son Eric when he continually missed milestones. Eric was soon diagnosed with an auditory processing disorder. Karin enrolled her son in an early intervention program and private therapy when he was 3, where Eric made significant progress with intense speech therapy.

"My greatest wish and prayer was that he would go to public school," Pam said. "I love our school down the street. They have my utmost respect, but they don't have the tools for Eric. He's a unique learner. He's ambitious and wants to learn."

When Eric entered the public school, Karin tried a variety of tools, including securing an IEP for Eric and transitioning to a self-contained English class. But Karen soon found that no matter how hard Eric tried, he could not stay focused.

"My son took a very serious downward spiral," Karen said. "He lost weight, cried, and did not want to go to school. Since age 3, he had been in school and loved it."

One day, Eric cried so much that it took 15 minutes for him to breathe normally. The next day, Karen went to Eric's school to talk about his options.

Karen was referred to Bridges Academy.

"On my first [trip to the school], I felt a

hundred pounds lift off my shoulders," Karen said. "I just knew; my heart felt it."

Karen heard about the McKay program through the public schools at an IEP meeting. Karen applied for the scholarship, which pays for part of the tuition. Eric, 10, was very

comfortable with his new school and could not wait to start. In his new school, Eric's self-esteem has flourished, and he has become friendly and outgoing.

"Without the McKay scholarship, this would not be possible for us," Karen said.

John M. McKay Scholarship for Students with Disabilities Program

Program Facts

The John M. McKay Scholarship for Students with Disabilities Program is the first special needs scholarship program in the country. In the program's first year, two students received scholarships; in the 2011-12 school year, 22,861 students received scholarships to attend 1,050 participating schools. Students remain eligible under the program until high school graduation or age 22, whichever comes first. Students must be 5 years old at the beginning of the school year to receive a scholarship.

Program Type

Special needs voucher

Year Established

1999

Scholarship Cap

- Whichever is less:
 - Amount of public school funding students would have received
 - Tuition and fees of private school

Student Eligibility

- Have an Individualized Education Program (IEP)
- Have an accommodation plan under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act
- Attended public school in any of the five years prior to the 2010-11 fiscal year
- Children of transferring U.S. military personnel are exempt from prior year public school attendance requirement
- Children who received specialized instructional services under the Voluntary Pre-K Education Program (VPK) the previous school year are exempt from prior year public school attendance requirement



Georgia's Special Needs Scholarship Program

Connor Pittman, 17, plays lacrosse and is on the swim team as a junior at Collins Hill High School in Suwanee, Ga. Connor has been attending public school for the past three years, but once attended Ava White Academy using the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship.

With dyslexia and an auditory processing disability, Connor had difficulty processing information, which significantly impacted his reading skills. When he entered the first grade, Connor received an IEP and was in special education. By the fifth grade, he was struggling through school.

"I knew my son had a disability," said Maura Pittman, Connor's mother. "It was me against the world. I wanted a reading program and because I pushed for it, they took it out on my child."

When Connor entered middle school, he continued to have problems, while Maura pushed for more options for her son. In the eighth grade, he finally switched to a private school.

"The confidence my son got at Ava [White Academy] made him able to attend high school," Maura said. "I believe in my son, but up until that point, he didn't believe me. He thought he was the only one in the world with a reading

problem. He thought he was the only one who was different."

Now in his junior year, Connor is again attending public school. He uses books on tape, listens in class, and is given notes.

"Accommodations are in place, and your child can be successful so they can continue to grow," Maura said. "Self-esteem is half the battle. Lots of kids are the same way, and they have to believe that."

Georgia's Special Needs Scholarship

Program Facts

The Georgia Special Needs Scholarship Program allows eligible special needs students to transfer to a public school or participating private school. Scholarship recipients continue to receive their scholarship through high school graduation or until the student turns 22 years old. In the 2011-12 school year, 2,529 scholarships were awarded.

Program Type

Special needs voucher

Year Established

2007

Scholarship Cap

- Whichever is less:
 - Amount of public school funding student would have received
 - Tuition and fees of private school

Student Eligibility

- Attended public school the previous year
- Have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for the entire school year prior to receiving a scholarship



Louisiana's School Choice Pilot Program for Certain Students with Exceptionalities

When the Lewis family moved to Baton Rouge, La., Alicia Lewis brought documentation of a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome and bipolar disorder, a psychologist evaluation, and an IEP that her son Simon had at his out-of-state public school. But Louisiana would not accept out-of-state documentation and wanted Simon to attend public school without an IEP, and go through another year of testing.

Simon began to decline in function at the public school, and he shut down socially to preserve his well-being.

This fall, Simon started the seventh grade at Greater Baton Rouge Academy, a private school that focuses on children with special needs. And thanks to the special needs program, he's thriving.

"[The scholarship] allows Simon to be in a school I know he needs to be in," Alicia said. "It is really the only option for us as a family and for Simon's well-being."

After just two weeks of attending his new school, Simon became engaged with what was going on and was able to tolerate being in a school environment. Simon is not overstimulated and is much calmer.

"All the students understand they are special," Alicia said. "They accept each other, and that is a huge difference."

Louisiana's School Choice Pilot Program for Certain Students with Exceptionalities

Program Facts

The School Choice Pilot Program for Certain Students with Exceptionalities provides scholarships for students with special needs to attend private school. The program began in the 2011-12 school year with 186 students.

Program Type

Special needs voucher

Year Established

2010

Scholarship Cap

- Whichever is less:
 - 50 percent of state per-pupil funding
 - Tuition of private school

Student Eligibility

- Have an Individualized Education Program (IEP)
- Be in need of services for autism, mental disability, emotional disturbance, developmental delay, other health impairment-specific learning disability, or traumatic brain injury
- Eligible to attend public school
- Reside in one of the six largest parishes: Jefferson, East Baton Rouge, Orleans, Caddo, St. Tammany, or Lafayette
- Private school students also eligible



Ohio's Autism Scholarship Program

Pam and Larry Wells of Kinsman, Ohio, have been raising their grandson Jeffrey, known as J.J., since he was a baby. At age 2, J.J. was diagnosed with autism.

Recommended by a neurologist to attend the Rich Center to best meet J.J.'s needs, Pam and Larry looked at the cost and how to get started. Then Pam heard about Ohio's Autism Scholarship Program.

"We feel like new parents again," Pam said. "It's been a blessing to have this scholarship. Larry and I would not know what to do [without it]."

Pam and Larry drive 100 miles every day to bring J.J. to and from school, where he receives speech therapy and occupational therapy. The school provides small classes and three teachers per class.

With the Autism Scholarship Program, J.J. is able to get one-on-one guidance from people who know J.J. as well as his grandparents know him.

In the three years since J.J. began attending the Rich Center, he has made significant improvements. Being nonverbal was a challenge for Pam and Larry, but J.J. can now use an iPad and a computer.

"I can sum it up in one thing," Pam said. "J.J. would never make eye contact; he didn't wave bye bye; but now, he's fine and uses sign language. He tells us please, thank you, more, all done, and can sign his name."

Pam and Larry have advice for others who are struggling with ways to find more educational options for autistic children:

"When you get the diagnosis and you start looking around, there are choices out there: resources, scholarships, and a ton of people who will help you. I have already told [other parents]. There is help out there."

Autism Scholarship Program

Program Facts

The Autism Scholarship Program provides scholarships to students with autism. Children may receive scholarships for preschool special education as early as age 3. Scholarships may be used until the student graduates from high school or turns 22 years old, whichever comes first. Parents must reapply for the program each year. In the 2011-12 school year, 2,236 students participated in the program.

Program Type

Special needs voucher

Year Established

2003

Scholarship Cap

- \$20,000

Student Eligibility

- Be identified as autistic through assigned school district
- Have Individualized Education Program (IEP)
- Private school students also eligible



Oklahoma's Lindsey Nicole Henry Scholarship for Students with Disabilities Program

Ian Buckley attended public school through the third grade with an Individualized Education Program.

With a learning disability and a sensory integration disability, Ian struggled socially in school. Many afternoons, when he was picked up from school, he was upset. Ian did not fit into any peer group at his school.

In July 2010, Ian's family applied for the Lindsey Nicole Henry Scholarship for Students with Disabilities Program. With the scholarship, Ian switched to Town and Country School, a private school for children with special needs.

"Socially, he's a lot more sure of himself now," said Gerald, Ian's father. "It's a great learning environment, and [Ian is] a lot more receptive and is not afraid to ask questions."

Ian, now in the fifth grade, is thriving at his new school.

"The scholarship made something really terrific feasible," Gerald said. "The scholarship introduced Ian to the school that he'll go to for the rest of his school life."

Lindsey Nicole Henry Scholarship for Students with Disabilities Program

Program Facts

The Lindsey Nicole Henry Scholarship for Students with Disabilities Program provides scholarships for eligible students to attend private schools. The program was enacted in 2010 and awarded 10 scholarships at six participating schools. In the 2011-12 school year, 160 students were awarded scholarships.

Program Type

Special needs voucher

Year Established

2010

Scholarship Cap

- Whichever is less:
 - 100 percent of the state and local public school funding for each child (takes into account grade and disability)
 - Tuition and fees of the private school
- The local school district may keep up to 5 percent of the scholarship amount for administrative services

Student Eligibility

- Have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) in effect at the time the scholarship is assigned
- Attended public school the previous school year
- Children of transferring U.S. military personnel are exempt from prior year public school attendance requirement
- Have regular and direct contact with private school teachers at the physical location of the private school



Utah's Carson Smith Special Needs Scholarship

Carson Smith may never know that he is the namesake of a scholarship program that helps hundreds of other kids with special needs like him. At a young age, Carson was diagnosed with severe autism.

At first, Carson attended public schools like the rest of his siblings. But after a few months, Carson's teachers told his parents that he needed an even more specialized environment to be able to succeed.

Carson's teachers recommended the Pingree School for Children with Autism, a school specially designed for children with autism like Carson. But at \$23,000 a year, the much-needed alternative was prohibitively expensive.

"Carson's kindergarten tuition at the Pingree School was more than my [other] son's tuition in medical school at the University of Utah. And he would never 'graduate' from autism," Cheryl explained. The Smiths made many sacrifices to give their son the education he needed, but Cheryl wondered how they would continue to afford the high tuition and how other families made ends meet. "Getting the help your child with disabilities really needs and deserves should not be based on how much money you make," she said.

Cheryl was determined to see what she could do and contacted her state legislator, told him her family's story, and took him on a school tour to see Carson's positive environment.

"I wasn't asking for the moon, just some help," Cheryl recalled. "I'm just a mom. I have no political background. But we didn't know what we were going to do."

Determined to succeed, Cheryl and other families pushed to get a scholarship program passed, sometimes putting in as much as 50 hours of work a week.

Though autism still severely affects Carson's development, thanks to the scholarship, he is

making significant progress. With the help of his family and dedicated teachers, he has been toilet-trained, has learned to put on his own socks and pants, and can even say a few words, including "love you," a phrase that is priceless to Cheryl.

"Along with the challenges, he is also our greatest joy," Cheryl said. "Every new thing he does is a celebration. We can't imagine life without him."

Carson Smith Special Needs Scholarship

Program Facts

The Carson Smith Special Needs Scholarship allows eligible students to access a private school. In 2011, the program served 635 students. Scholarships are granted for a three-year period. After three years, an assessment team determines whether the student is still eligible to participate in the program. The scholarship may be renewed in three-year increments until the student graduates high school or turns 22 years old, whichever comes first.

Program Type

Special needs voucher

Year Established

2005

Scholarship Cap

- Based on the state's public school funding formula
 - \$7,040 for three or more hours of services
 - \$4,224 for fewer than three hours of services

Student Eligibility

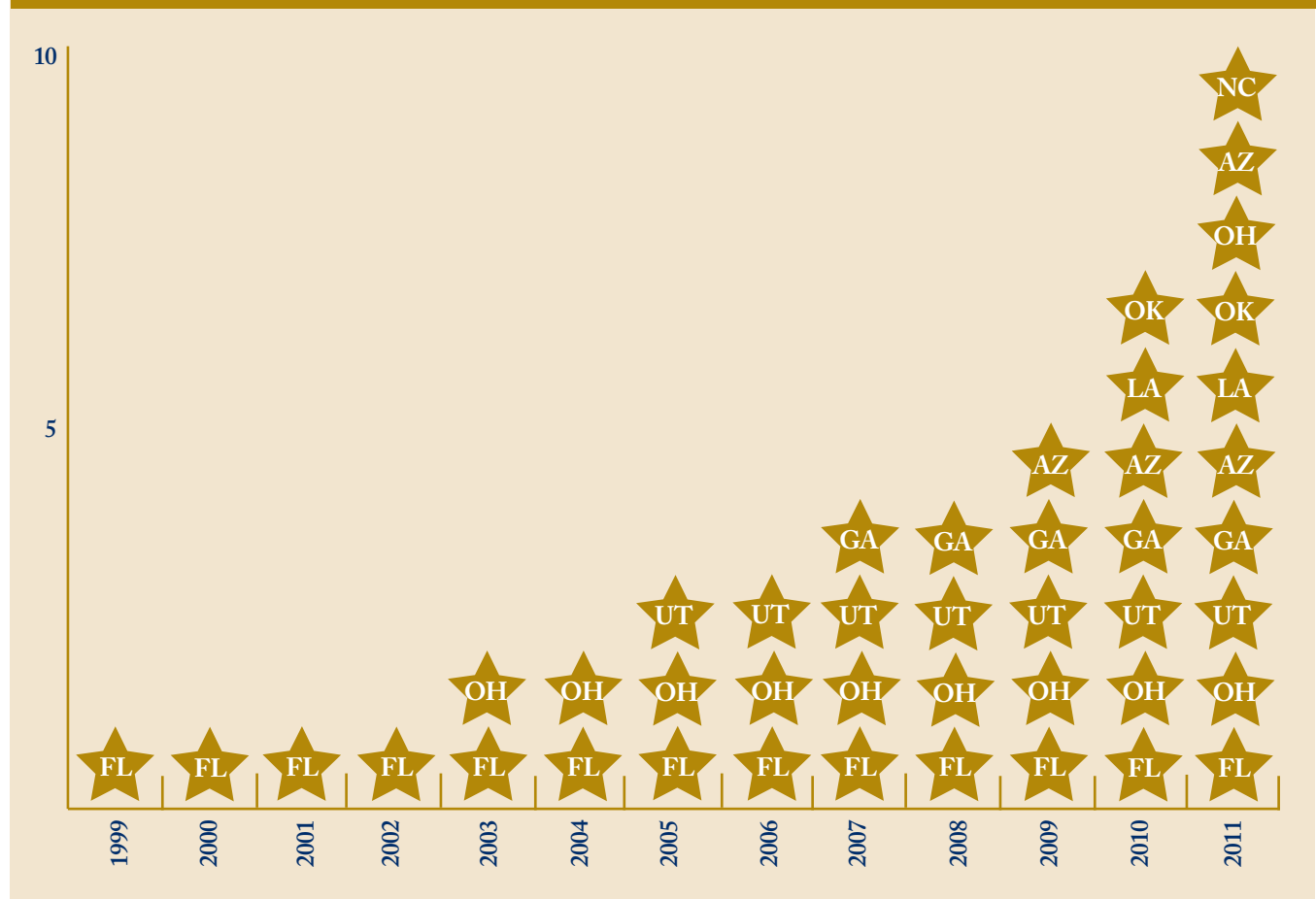
- Identified as disabled and have an Individualized Education Program (IEP)
- Currently attending an eligible private school and be determined in need of specialized services

Progress of Special Needs Scholarship Programs

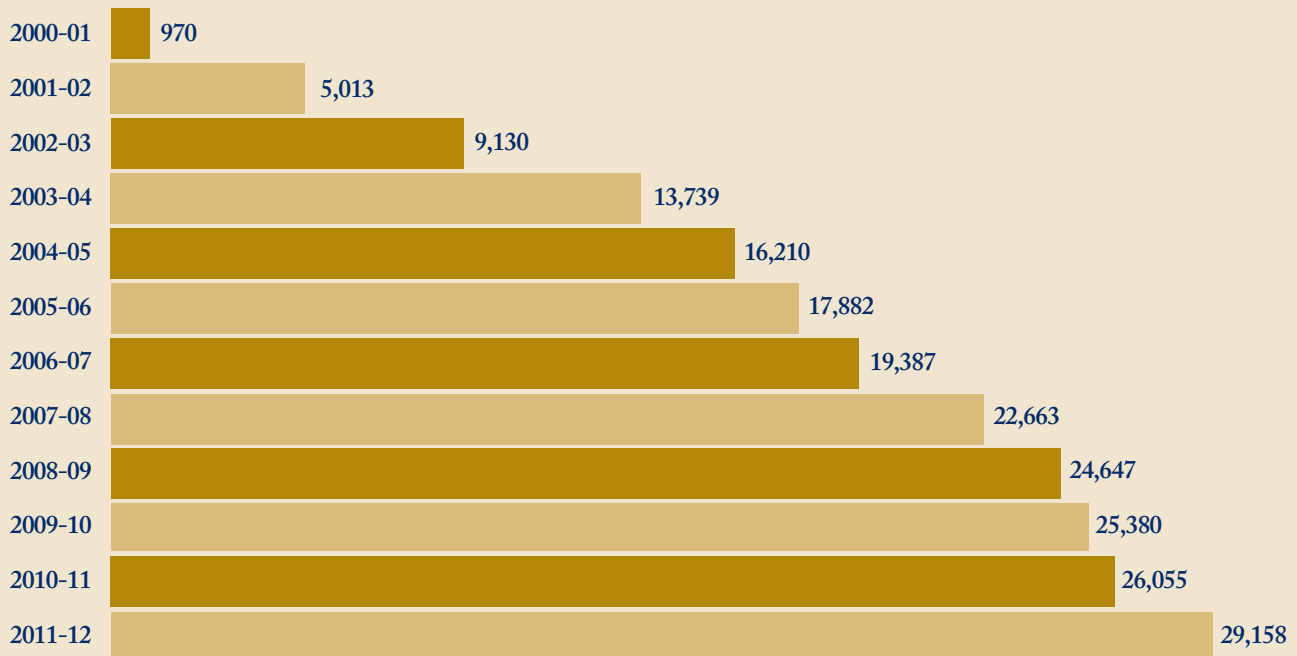
In 1999, Florida enacted the nation's first scholarship program for children with special needs. The John M. McKay Scholarship for Students with Disabilities provided scholarships to just two students in the program's first year. In the 2011-12 school year, the program served nearly 23,000 children, allowing special needs students to attend the public or private school that best meets their educational needs.

Today, 10 programs in eight states have been enacted to help thousands of children across the nation. In 2011, Arizona created a new kind of special needs school choice program with the introduction of Empowerment Scholarship Accounts (ESAs); Ohio created the Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship Program, a special needs voucher program to begin in the 2012-13 school year, and North Carolina created a nonrefundable individual income tax credit of up to \$6,000.

Momentum in Creating Special Needs Scholarship Programs



Growth of Enrollment in Special Needs Scholarship Programs



Model Legislation

The Alliance for School Choice supports several pieces of model legislation that create accountable and effective school choice programs. Visit www.AllianceForSchoolChoice.org to download model legislation designed for children with special needs.

Special Needs Scholarship Program Act

Creates a scholarship program that provides students with special needs the option to attend the public or private school of their parents' choice.

Autism Scholarship Program Act

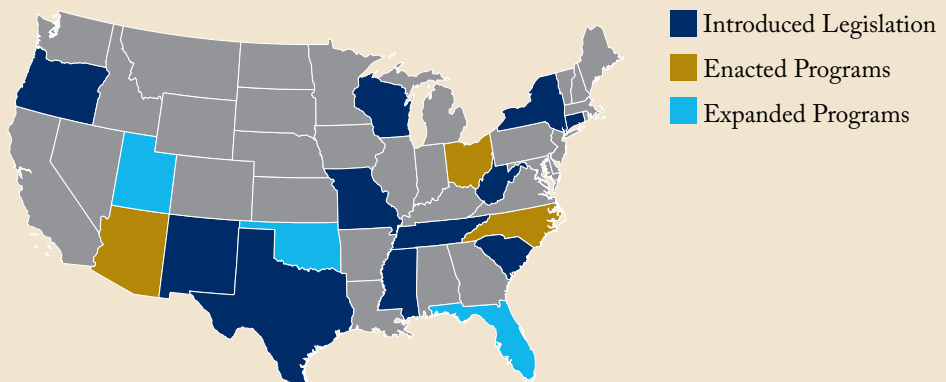
Creates a scholarship program that provides students with autism the option to attend the public or private school of their parents' choice.

Education Savings Account Act

Creates a program that allows parents to use the funds that would have been allocated to the resident school district for an education program of the parents' choosing.

Legislative Initiatives for Special Needs Bills in 2010-11 Session

During the 2010-11 legislative session, 17 states introduced legislation to create special needs scholarship programs. Three new programs were enacted in Ohio, Arizona, and North Carolina, and three existing special needs scholarship programs were strengthened and expanded in Florida, Utah, and Oklahoma.



Accountability Check

The Alliance for School Choice supports strong, commonsense accountability provisions for school choice programs. Not only are transparency and accountability smart public policy, but they provide the school choice movement and school choice advocates with readily available data and information to improve programs, and to describe their successes. These charts detail the accountability provisions that exist in special needs school choice programs.

Voucher Programs

		Administrative Accountability			Financial Accountability		Academic Accountability		
		Health and Safety	Non-Discrimination	Background Checks	Annual Financial Reporting	Proof of Financial Viability	Standardized Assessments	Public Reporting of Results	Independent Evaluation
State	Program Name								
Florida	John M. McKay Scholarship for Students with Disabilities Program	✓	✓	✓		✓			
Georgia	Georgia Special Needs Scholarship Program	✓	✓			✓			
Louisiana	School Choice Pilot Program for Certain Students with Exceptionalities	✓	✓						
Ohio	Autism Scholarship Program	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Ohio	Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship Program	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Oklahoma	Lindsey Nicole Henry Scholarship for Students with Disabilities Program	✓	✓			✓			
Utah	Carson Smith Special Needs Scholarship	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		

* Not necessarily a standardized test; low requires a formal testing procedure

Scholarship Tax Credit Programs

		SGO Administrative and Financial Accountability			School Administrative and Financial Accountability				Academic Accountability		
		Background Checks	Submit Donation/Scholarship Details	Annual Financial Reporting	Health and Safety	Non-Discrimination	Background Checks	Proof of Financial Viability	Standardized Assessments	Public Reporting of Results	Independent Evaluation
State	Program Name										
Arizona	Lexie's Law		✓	✓	✓	✓					

Education Savings Accounts

		Administrative Accountability			Financial Accountability		Academic Accountability		
		Health and Safety	Non-Discrimination	Background Checks	Proof of Financial Viability	Annual Audits (Random Sample)	Standardized Assessments	Public Reporting of Results	Independent Evaluation
State	Program Name								
Arizona	Arizona Empowerment Scholarship Accounts		✓			✓			

Local Organizations and Resources

Arizona

Arizona Department of Revenue
www.azdor.gov/

Arizona School Choice
www.arizonaschoolchoice.com

Arizona Department of Education
<http://www.azed.gov/>

Florida

Florida Department of Education
www.floridaschoolchoice.org/

McKayScholarship.com

Step Up for Students
www.stepupforstudents.org

Georgia

Georgia Department of Education
www.doe.k12.ga.us

Center for an Educated Georgia
www.educatedgeorgia.org/

Louisiana

Louisiana Department of Education
www.doe.state.la.us/

Ohio

Ohio Department of Education
www.ode.state.oh.us

School Choice Ohio
www.schohio.org

Oklahoma

Oklahoma State Department of Education
www.sde.state.ok.us/

Utah

Utah State Office of Education
<http://www.schools.utah.gov>

Parents for Choice in Education
www.choiceineducation.org

National

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