



**THE FLORIDA SENATE**  
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*President*

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**Senate Passes Bill to Improve Transparency and Efficiency for School Choice Scholarships**  
*SB 7030 names school choice scholarships for students with unique abilities after Senate President John McKay and the family of Senate President Andy Gardiner*

**Tallahassee**—The Florida Senate today passed Senate Bill 7030, Educational Scholarship Programs, a committee bill from the Senate Appropriations Committee on Pre-K-12 Education, chaired by Senator Danny Burgess (R-Zephyrhills), which makes various changes to education choice and school funding statutes to increase transparency and improve efficiency for schools and families. Chair Burgess; Senator Don Gaetz (R-Crestview), a former Superintendent of schools in Okaloosa County who previously served as Senate President from 2012-2014; and, Senator Corey Simon (R-Tallahassee), Senate sponsor of HB 1 (2022), which created Florida’s universal school choice program, are leading this legislation for the Senate.

“Once again this year, Florida taxpayers will make an unprecedented investment in our children’s education. In the new environment of universal choice, where the money follows the student, we know everyone is working diligently to ensure students have access to the educational settings their parents choose. However, as our choice programs expand, mid-year transitions have proven difficult to keep track of. Additionally, parents with students in the personalized education program and unique abilities program have been frustrated by the reimbursement process, which can be quite time consuming and at times inefficient. This legislation is about lessons learned over the last few years. To ensure our school choice programs live up to their full potential and promise, this bill adds new efficiencies to improve both education choice and public-school funding for everyone,” **said Senator Burgess.**

“Taxpayers, parents, teachers, and school administrators expect and deserve a swift and accurate accounting of taxpayer dollars spent on education to ensure schools have the funds they need for the students they serve. Likewise, we need better processes for our families receiving funding for the personalized education program and those who have children with unique abilities to receive timely distributions and reimbursements,” **said Senator Gaetz.** “Over the last few years, we have learned that for the money to truly follow the student, we need better ways to track where students are at key points throughout the school year. We also need to ensure money appropriately follows the student to the family’s provider of choice, including when they move back and forth between providers. With input from stakeholders across the spectrum of school

choice, this bill creates reasonable timeframes and mechanisms to improve both transparency and efficiency in education funding.”

“Florida leads the nation in parental choice in education. Our robust, universal school choice programs provide every parent in our state the opportunity to select the educational environment that works best for his or her children, whether that’s traditional public, private, charter, virtual, or home school,” **said Senator Simon**. “This legislation will improve efficiency and increase transparency for families and schools as our choice programs continue to expand.”

During today’s sitting, Senator Gaetz offered an amendment to SB 7030 to name Florida’s school choice scholarships for students with unique abilities, currently referred to as Family Empowerment Scholarships for Students with Unique Abilities (FES-UA), as McKay-Gardiner Scholarships. The original McKay Scholarships for Students with Disabilities Program was created in 1999 under the leadership of Senator John McKay (Senate President 2000-2002). The Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts (PLSA) Program, which created the first individual education accounts for school choice students, was created in 2014 and renamed in 2016 to honor Senator Andy Gardiner (Senate President 2014-2016) and his family's advocacy for children with unique abilities. During the 2021 reorganization of school choice programs, both programs were consolidated under the Family Empowerment Scholarship. In the new era of universal school choice, SB 7030 honors the legacy of Presidents McKay and Gardiner, renaming Florida’s school choice scholarships for students with unique abilities as McKay-Gardiner Scholarships.

### **SB7030**

*Conforms with the Senate’s proposed budget to ensure dedicated funding for traditional public schools and school choice programs*

- Establishes an operating categorical fund for implementing the Family Empowerment Scholarship (FES) program. The FES operating categorical fund would move funding of the FES scholarships out of the school district Florida Education Finance Program (FEFP) calculation and fund the FES scholarships separately.
- Expands the use of the Educational Stabilization Fund to minimize disruptions for school districts and to ensure all scholarships are funded for eligible students. These uses include:
  - Providing funding to districts with increases in student full-time equivalent (FTE).
  - Providing funding for students eligible for the FES who are above the forecasted amounts in the budget.
  - Providing funding to students receiving a Personalized Education Program (PEP/Homeschool) scholarship above the available tax credit revenues for scholarships.
  - Providing supplemental one-time funding to districts with a decline in student FTE.

*Creates reasonable, consistent timeframes and streamlines registration so parents and schools can plan for the school year*

- Creates Fall and Spring application windows.
- Requires the use of a single application for all scholarship programs.
- Requires additional documentation to be submitted at the time of application: more than one form to document residency and the child's birth certificate.

*Improves transparency to ensure money follows the student*

- To ensure funds follow the student to the provider designated by the parents, the bill requires families to provide documentation that a student is not enrolled in a public school and is enrolled in a private school or registered with a district for a home-education program or personalized learning program.
  - The Department of Education (DOE) must cross-check scholarship applicants against the latest enrollment files to verify the applicant is not enrolled in a public school.
- To ensure the appropriate scholarship funds reach students, the bill requires the DOE to assign a student ID for all scholarship recipients to act as the official ID when processing scholarship information.
- The DOE must create a standard withdrawal form to be used by scholarship applicants when leaving the public school system.

*Streamlines payment schedules to ensure consistency and reliability of scholarship funds*

- All families must verify continued eligibility prior to each payment.
- Changes the scholarship payment installments from quarterly to monthly.
- Allows the DOE to provide funds to the Scholarship Funding Organizations (SFOs) for the first quarter of the fiscal year based on the forecasted scholarship numbers.
- Changes the first payment installment of the year for all scholarship recipients to mid-August.
- Clarifies protocols for ineligible or inactive accounts.

*Updates reimbursement protocols to ensure timely invoicing and payment*

- Requires the DOE to develop a uniform reimbursement and invoicing process.
- Standardizes the authorized use of funds among the scholarships.
- Expands the eligibility criteria for individuals who may provide tutoring services.
- Expands the authorized use of funds to include membership and activity fees for Career and Technical Student Organizations.

*Increases reporting and auditing to improve accountability to taxpayers*

- Requires the Auditor General to periodically conduct an end-of-year FTE audit of the scholarship programs.
- Requires the SFOs to return funds as a result of the audit findings.

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