

Committee on Education Pre-K -12

CS/CS/SB 112 — Children with Developmental Disabilities

by Fiscal Policy Committee; Education Pre-K – 12 Committee; and Senator Harrell

The bill expands and coordinates state efforts to support children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD or autism) and other developmental disabilities through early intervention, school readiness services, specialized educational options, and professional training. It also codifies and assigns new responsibilities to the University of Florida Center for Autism and Neurodevelopment (UF CAN), establishes new grant programs, and extends eligibility for Florida's Early Steps Program.

Early Steps Extended Option

The bill creates the Early Steps Extended Option, which allows eligible children to continue receiving services through the Early Steps Program (Early Steps) until the beginning of the school year following their fourth birthday. To qualify, a child must be:

- Determined eligible for Early Steps services at least 45 days before his or her third birthday;
- Eligible for services under Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA); and
- Enrolled by parent choice in the Extended Option before his or her third birthday.

The Department of Health (DOH) must seek federal approval for the option by July 1, 2026, but may implement the program with state funds regardless of federal participation. The child's family must choose between Early Steps or IDEA Part B services; children may not receive services under both programs concurrently or reenter the Extended Option once they exit. School districts and local Early Steps offices must coordinate transitions to school district services or other programs, convene joint conferences, and develop or modify education plans. The DOH must include performance measures for the program in its annual Early Steps report.

The bill appropriates \$720,282 in recurring funds and \$35,622 in nonrecurring funds from the General Revenue Fund to the DOH and authorizes six full-time equivalent positions to implement the Early Steps Extended Option.

UF Center for Autism and Neurodevelopment

The bill codifies the UF CAN and assigns it a broad range of responsibilities, including:

- Coordinating research, training, public awareness, and best practices related to autism;
- Collaborating with state and local agencies, the Florida State University Autism Institute, each Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD), and others;
- Creating an autism micro-credential, available at no cost to instructional personnel, early learning providers, and child care staff. The micro-credential must align with the autism endorsement and include competencies in identification, instructional strategies, assistive

technology, and classroom support. Participants who earn the credential are eligible for a one-time stipend; and

- Administering new grant programs and reporting annually, beginning August 1, 2026, on expenditures and outcomes.

Autism Charter School Startup Grants

The bill establishes a startup grant program to assist in the creation or expansion of charter schools and laboratory schools that exclusively serve students with autism. UF CAN must administer the program and develop guidelines, including application requirements, planning assistance, eligibility criteria, and accountability reporting. Grants may be used for facility acquisition or improvements, specialized materials and technology, staff recruitment and training, and transportation. Priority is given to applicants serving rural and underserved areas or with a track record of success. Schools may receive funding after securing charter or laboratory school approval.

Specialized Summer Program Grants

The bill creates a specialized summer program grant to support structured, inclusive summer services for children with autism and significant cognitive or behavioral needs. UF CAN must administer the program, publish grant guidelines, and offer technical assistance. Eligible programs must operate for at least four weeks and provide a full-day schedule that may include therapy, skill building, recreational activities, and family training. Staff must be appropriately trained, and grant funding may support facilities, staffing, equipment, curriculum, insurance, and transportation. Programs must submit a post-program report to UF CAN.

Additional Provisions

The bill includes additional provisions related to grant funding and professional development. The bill:

- Expands the Dr. and Mrs. Alfonse and Kathleen Cinotti Health Care Screening and Services Grant Program to allow grant funds to be used for autism screenings, referrals for treatment, and related services provided by nonprofit organizations.
- Requires the Commissioner of Education to review continuing education and inservice training related to ASD and to submit findings and recommendations to the Legislature by December 1, 2025.
- Allows autism-related training to be applied toward the renewal requirements for professional educator certificates.

If approved by the Governor, or allowed to become law without the Governor's signature, these provisions take effect upon becoming law.

Vote: Senate 38-0; House 113-0