

# CHOICES AND CHALLENGES

Florida Parents' Experiences with the State's McKay and Gardiner Scholarship Programs for Students with Disabilities

POLICY BRIEF

This brief summary and its companion [report](#) center the stories of parents from across the state, as they seek out educational options for their children with disabilities. Through a systematic and rigorous analysis of interviews with **nearly 100 parents** and **more than 4,000 survey responses**, the report illuminates the benefits and the limitations of an ongoing statewide investment of hundreds of millions of dollars each year.<sup>1</sup>

## Policy background

All parents want the best for their children. Getting “the best,” however, can be vastly more complicated for a family that includes a child with disabilities. In Florida, thanks to a robust school choice environment, parents of students with disabilities<sup>2</sup> have access to several educational options through two specific statewide scholarship programs: [McKay Scholarships for Students with Disabilities](#) and the [Gardiner Scholarship Program](#).

To shed light on how parents utilize these scholarships, a team of researchers from [CERES Institute for Children and Youth](#) at Boston University Wheelock College of Education & Human Development, in partnership with the [Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas](#), pursued a deeper understanding of two research questions:

- How do families who receive Gardiner and McKay scholarships [navigate](#) school choice and supplemental supports for their children?
- How [satisfied](#) are parents with the scholarship schools they have chosen and the supports their children have received?

The mixed-methods research study, including both survey and interview data, was conducted between fall 2019 to spring 2020.

## Key takeaways from the research

When offered the opportunity to choose a new school from among many options, how do parents find their way to the best choice for their child? This study finds that parents' experiences have three common themes.

- Navigating school choice in Florida for families of students with disabilities is **complex**. It is a journey that requires significant time, energy, and additional financial resources. For some, the journey requires multiple transitions between schools before finding the right fit.
- Nearly all parents of both Gardiner and McKay scholarship participants (over 90%) are somewhat or very satisfied with their child's educational experience, citing **transformative changes and benefits** they perceive for themselves and their children.
- Participating parents overwhelmingly **recommend** that the scholarship programs continue—with modifications that would reduce barriers to accessing or fully benefiting from the scholarship.

Boston University Wheelock College of Education & Human Development  
CERES Institute for Children & Youth



This policy brief is presented by [CERES \(Community-Engaged Research and Evaluation Sciences\) Institute for Children and Youth at Boston University Wheelock College of Education & Human Development](#). The full report and reference list are available at [ceresinstitute.org](https://ceresinstitute.org).

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## WHAT PARENTS SAY<sup>3</sup>

“ [H]ow did I become aware of the school? There is not a clearinghouse or a place that I could go to. For instance, I go online to Gardiner. When I go for reimbursement, there’s a drop-down box that lists literally hundreds— if not a thousand—different tutors, schools, programs. But nowhere do I know where to find information on those. So if I was beginning this process for my child, and say my child was six or seven or maybe even 10, I would be hard pressed to find out what program would meet the needs of my child. If Gardiner could somehow come up with an information source that provided that, it would be—I think it would be almost magical for some families.”

Gardiner Scholarship Recipient, Polk County

“ I did have more than one option but I did also feel like the options were very limited. Like I had to choose, there wasn’t one school that had all the things I wanted there. I just had to choose which was most important. So, for example, the school that we chose, I decided that the highest priority for him at the time was the small student–teacher ratio. But that school for example, didn’t have an outdoor playground, and they didn’t have lunch provided at the school, and they didn’t have extracurricular activity. So, there was another private school I saw that had those options. But he was going to be in a much larger classroom setting where individualized instruction wouldn’t be possible. So... there wasn’t a school that offered everything.”

McKay Scholarship Recipient, Duval County

“ I did not really have a lot of choices for high school. I literally had two. And only one was near me. So if I didn’t like this school, if he has a problem in the school we’re out. I don’t have another choice.”

Gardiner Scholarship Recipient, Pinellas County

“ It’s night and day difference. He came out of third grade, being at probably a first grade math level. He had not been doing science or history... language arts I mean was still probably first grade level... he always had amazing teachers but if your kids learn in a way that you know you can’t be 20 different places at once. So I feel like for his situation it’s been a complete game changer... And just, you know, I honestly can’t think of anything that we haven’t been able to do.”

Gardiner Scholarship Recipient, Clay County

“ It gave us the opportunity to make this decision for him. You know, you always want to do whatever your child needs and you’re willing to sacrifice. But when you have a special needs child, of course, they already have greater needs that mean sometimes you’re making the choices between that and other things... without Gardiner you’re really at a point where your children really aren’t getting their needs met.”

Gardiner Scholarship Recipient, Liberty County

“ I would say based on my experience from public schools, homeschooling, and four different schools before we landed in this awesome school, I would say that having teachers to be well-educated, prepared and caring I think that is truly important because I haven’t seen it in a lot of places where even though they accept either my kid or Gardiner scholarship, they’re in it just to be getting the money and they don’t have any resources, they don’t have any prepared teachers. They don’t have teachers that have any, you know, special education background. And that is really hurtful for our kids. My son still is struggling with it and it’s affecting his social skills because of all the trauma that he has based on the prior schools he has been at.”

McKay Scholarship Recipient, Orange County

“ Well, I know that the list... When you go get it, there’s a list of approved schools. It’s enormous. So it was super complicated to decide, but once [other parents] told me, “We know this school, we’ve been there.” ...then my husband and I were scheduling an appointment. We went there; we saw the school. Then our kid had to spend a day over there, and he’s the one who told me that he liked it. So that’s when I decided that I was not going to look for any other schools.”

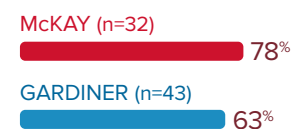
Gardiner Scholarship Recipient, Miami-Dade County

## Parent satisfaction

PERCENTAGE SOMEWHAT OR VERY SATISFIED WITH...			
	McKay Participants	Gardiner Enrolled	Non-Participants
The school your child attended this year	91%	93%	85%
The teachers your child had this year	91%	94%	87%
The academic expectations of the school	90%	92%	85%
The order and discipline at the school	91%	93%	82%
The way that school staff interacts with parents	91%	93%	83%
The school's communication with your family	89%	91%	83%
Your child's special needs teacher or therapist	88%	92%	82%
The school's ability to accommodate your child's special needs	87%	91%	82%
The school's commitment to help your child learn	90%	94%	86%

Higher-income families spend more money out-of-pocket. Families with incomes above \$60,000 spend about an additional \$4,000, while other families spend about \$1,700.

Parents reporting out-of-pocket spending on their child's education



## Implications for policy and practice

This report's findings raise several considerations for statewide action to ensure that the existing scholarship programs are more widely accessible and more definitively equitable. Here are five that the report's authors recommend.

- Provide user-friendly, robust resources that equip parents to make informed choices.** The process of selecting and enrolling in a scholarship school could be made simpler and more transparent by providing parents with a single searchable online database that allows them to filter the list of schools that accept the scholarships by distance from a home address, available slots, services and supplemental supports provided, parent reviews, and other key characteristics. In addition, providing parents with guidance on sample questions to ask and observations to make when considering a school<sup>4</sup> could help them evaluate program offerings and get the most out of each school visit.
- Focus on creating more equitable access to information and services.** The findings point toward inequities in access to information as well as gaps between the cost of services and the amount of scholarship support. Families with fewer resources, financial and otherwise, experience greater barriers to fully utilizing the scholarships. Policymakers should strive to better understand what these barriers are, and under what circumstances they arise.
- Examine transitions between school levels, especially to and from middle school.** Natural transitions that occur between elementary/middle and middle/high school pose an additional challenge to families of children with disabilities. A common theme that emerged across parent interviews was that parents applied for scholarships as their child prepared to transition to middle school. Parents described a lack of confidence that their assigned public middle school would be able to fully serve their child's needs due to the increasing class sizes and lack of individualized services.
- Continue to focus on improving accountability.** Although parents were overwhelmingly satisfied with their child's current school, this study found that many attended more than one school to find this good fit. Further, among the small number of families who said that promised services were not provided at their scholarship school, between one-fifth (Gardiner) and one-third (McKay) described the shortfall as serious.

Since the inception of the McKay and Gardiner programs, the state has passed a number of measures designed to increase accountability. These updates to the law require schools to meet minimum standards of quality, ensure teachers fulfill

certification requirements and pass background checks, and help address potential fraud. These measures, however, do not guarantee that each child will receive a high-quality education or find the right fit. The most recent legislation expanding school choice (see HB7045) does not enhance accountability despite the infusion of millions of additional dollars. Several amendments to add accountability measures were rejected during the legislature’s deliberations.

- **Give all parents of eligible students a real voice in the policies and practices that govern the scholarships.** The McKay and Gardiner scholarships serve some of Florida’s most vulnerable children; they represent a big investment in students, families, and schools. The authors urge policymakers to more fully understand the impact of this investment through further qualitative and quantitative research that focuses on hearing parents’ own ideas about making information about the scholarships more widely and easily accessible; enabling access to specialized services when the cost exceeds a family’s financial resources; and evaluating the best learning environment for their child at each age and stage, particularly when making the transition to middle school.

## Looking ahead

In Spring 2021, the Florida state legislature passed legislation that would commit an additional \$200M to the school choice program, expand eligibility, and merge the McKay and Gardiner Scholarships into the Family Empowerment Scholarship Program, effective July 1st.<sup>5</sup> *Choices and Challenges* illustrates that, for parents of students with disabilities, the process of obtaining and using these scholarships is not simple. They express gratitude for the scholarships and for an expanded array of educational options for their children; but the individual stories about their journeys paint a much more complex picture of navigating the scholarship programs and the expanded choices. As July 1st approaches, this report demonstrates the urgent need to provide eligible families with easy-to-access, consistent, high-quality information and a supporting ecosystem of other parents, educators, school leaders, and scholarship-granting organizations to help them make the best choice for their children.

- 1 See the fact sheets on the Florida Department of Education website, [www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/5606/urlt/McKay-Aug.pdf](http://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/5606/urlt/McKay-Aug.pdf) and [www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/5606/urlt/Gardiner.pdf](http://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/5606/urlt/Gardiner.pdf)
- 2 “Students with disabilities” is the term used in the name of the McKay Scholarship and the one most commonly used by the Florida Department of Education and its Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services. The Gardiner scholarship refers to “students with certain special needs” and “students with unique abilities.”
- 3 Each quote is taken from a parent interview. To protect families’ privacy, each is identified by the family’s county of residence and which scholarship their child received.
- 4 Usman, 2014
- 5 [www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2021/7045/BillText/e1/PDF](http://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2021/7045/BillText/e1/PDF); [www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2021/7045/Analyses/h7045a.APC.PDF](http://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2021/7045/Analyses/h7045a.APC.PDF)