



CHOICES AND CHALLENGES

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

SHANNON VARGA, ALBERT CHENG, EMILY COADY, YAWEI HUANG, SHEA MARTIN,
CATHLEEN DONOHUE, ANNA SKUBEL, JONATHAN ZAFF, MARISSA COLE & MICHELLE HYNES

“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.”^A

Gardiner Scholarship Recipient,
Liberty County

SUMMARY

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.^B Children with disabilities may struggle in school, both academically and socially. 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 report seeks to shed light on the perspectives of Florida parents eligible for two specific statewide scholarship programs that serve students with disabilities. Through individual and group interviews with nearly 100 parents, as well as more than 4,000 survey responses from eligible participating and non-participating parents, 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](#), sought to develop 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?

Based on both survey and interview data, the study finds that:

- 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 (about 90%) of both Gardiner and McKay scholarship participants 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.

The report **centers parents’ voices and their perspectives** in an effort to illuminate the benefits and the limitations of an ongoing statewide investment of hundreds of millions of dollars each year.^C The large sample size of the study and the mixed-methods approach build on previous literature not only about parents’ satisfaction, but also about the nature of their experiences and the

A 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.

B “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.”

C See the fact sheets on the Florida Department of Education website, www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/5606/urlt/McKay-Aug.pdf and www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/5606/urlt/Gardiner.pdf

constraints they encounter when trying to realize the promise that school choice offers to children with disabilities.

Findings from the report can help to [infuse parents' perspectives](#) into discussions about how to reduce inequities for students with disabilities, conversations that primarily occur among educational professionals (researchers, educators, and policymakers).¹ Given the popularity of and investments in school choice, policymakers and school administrators can benefit from a deeper understanding of families' experiences and their perspectives about what works, what common barriers come up in the process, and in what ways access to these programs can be expanded so that all families can truly benefit from them. The report has particular implications for the state of Florida.

EDUCATIONAL RIGHTS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

At the federal level, special education law for children with disabilities is governed by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a law passed in 1975 and amended in 1990. The law “makes available a free appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation and ensures special education and related services to those children” (See [ed.gov](#)). This federal education law governs how states and public agencies, including public schools and school districts, provide services to eligible children.

Requirements for individualized education plans (commonly referred to as IEPs) are spelled out in IDEA. To receive an IEP, students must have one of thirteen disabilities identified in the law, and the disabilities must impact a child’s educational performance or ability to learn from the general education curriculum.

504 accommodation plans are defined in Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, a federal civil rights law that set precedents for the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. These “504 plans” provide for ways a school can accommodate a wide range of conditions—not limited to the disabilities named in the IDEA—so that students are able to learn alongside their peers.

This blog post from [Understood.org](#) has a very handy side-by-side chart describing IEPs and 504 plans. [This brief from Center on Education Policy](#) offers a clear explanation of special education vouchers overall.

Importantly, private schools are not required to abide by federal special education regulations in IDEA or Section 504 of the ADA unless they receive federal funding. Two states, Wisconsin and Ohio, require private schools that accept special education vouchers to follow a student’s IEP. Most private schools, however, are willing to provide accommodations; they just may be fewer than what would be available (and in some cases, required) in a public setting. When parents choose to place their child in a private school or a homeschool setting, they give up some of the rights they have under these federal laws.

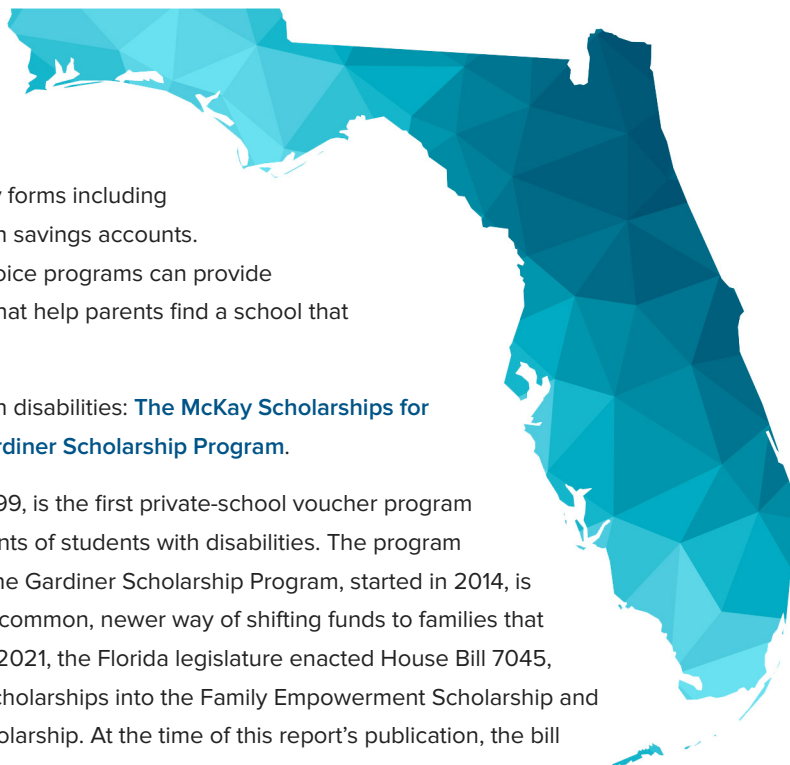
THE GARDINER AND MCKAY SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMS IN FLORIDA

As of 2019, there are 64 private school choice programs across the United States, 19 of which specifically serve students with disabilities. For some programs, choice is limited to public schools—for example, magnet schools, charter schools, or inter- and intra-district transfer programs that offer the chance to attend a public school besides the family’s residentially-assigned school. Others allow families to use public funds to choose a private school for their child. Private school choice can take many forms including vouchers, scholarships, tax credits, or education savings accounts. For students with disabilities, these types of choice programs can provide additional information and financial resources that help parents find a school that better fits their child’s unique needs.

Florida has two such programs for students with disabilities: **The McKay Scholarships for Students with Disabilities Program** and the **Gardiner Scholarship Program**.

The McKay Scholarship Program, initiated in 1999, is the first private-school voucher program in the nation to provide funding directly to parents of students with disabilities. The program has since served as a model for other states. The Gardiner Scholarship Program, started in 2014, is an education savings account program—a less common, newer way of shifting funds to families that is available in only a handful of states.^D In April 2021, the Florida legislature enacted House Bill 7045, which would merge the McKay and Gardiner Scholarships into the Family Empowerment Scholarship and infuse millions of additional dollars into this scholarship. At the time of this report’s publication, the bill was on its way to Florida Governor Ron DeSantis for his signature.

Students have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), a “504” accommodations program, or a diagnosis from a licensed therapist in one of the 13 categories identified in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).^E These programs have grown exponentially since their inception, and there is currently a waiting list for the Gardiner Scholarship.² [See the box About the Scholarships for more detail about the scholarships, and the box Educational Rights for Students with Disabilities about the related governing laws.]



D A bill currently in the Florida Senate (PCB EEC 21-01) would expand the use of education savings accounts to all of the state’s school choice programs.

E Specific eligibility requirements vary by scholarship; for more information: www.fldoe.org/schools/school-choice/k-12-scholarship-programs/mckay/mckay-faqs.shtml

ABOUT THE SCHOLARSHIPS

Florida is one of 29 states nationwide to embrace [school choice](#)³, which is designed to give parents the option to select an elementary or secondary school for their children other than the school they would ordinarily be assigned to attend. Florida's School Choice Program has been often cited by proponents of vouchers, including former Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos in her confirmation hearing before the United States Senate.⁴

At the time this research was conducted, Florida had six types of scholarships available as part of their school choice program. Two of these, the McKay and Gardiner scholarship programs, are specific to students with disabilities and are the subject of this report. With the passage of [House Bill 7045](#), these two scholarships will be merged into the Family Empowerment Scholarship and no longer be known as the "McKay" and "Gardiner." The requirements for parents of students with disabilities to access these funds will not change; however, there will be expanded eligibility.^F

The [McKay Scholarships](#) for Students with Disabilities Program, created in 1999 and named for former Senate President John M. McKay, provides scholarships for students in grades K-12 with disabilities to attend an eligible public or private school. In order to be eligible for a McKay scholarship, students must have an IEP (individualized education plan) or a 504 accommodations plan and have been enrolled in public schools the previous year.

Participants in the McKay Scholarship program receive a voucher to offset the costs of enrolling in a private or public school of their choice. The award amount is worth up to the lesser of the per-pupil allotment of their originally designated public school or the total cost of private school tuition and fees. In 2020, about 30,000 students participated in the McKay Scholarship program.

There is no income requirement for participation in the McKay Scholarship program, and there are no enrollment limits.⁵ Students may enroll if (1) there is space; (2) the school is able to accommodate their learning needs; and (3) they are accepted into the school. Over the last five years, approximately 31,000 students have utilized the McKay Scholarship each year.⁶

The [Gardiner Scholarship](#), named for former Florida Senate President Andy Gardiner, provides eligible students with funds that can be used to purchase approved services or products to support their educational needs, including therapies, instructional materials, summer or after-school programs, transition coaches, homeschool materials/accommodations, or private school tuition. It also allows funds to be deposited in a prepaid college account for future use.

Children age 3 through age 22 who are residents of Florida and have an IEP or disability diagnosis as specified by the Florida Department of Education (FL DOE) are eligible for the scholarship. Over 16,000 students participated in the Gardiner Program in 2020.⁷

The Gardiner Scholarship is administered by "Scholarship Funding Organizations" that have been approved by the state, including [Step Up for Students](#). Scholarship awards are influenced by the student's grade level and county. The average scholarship is approximately \$10,500. The state deposits funds into an education savings account,⁸ which participating families can use to pay for approved educational expenses.

^F www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2021/7045/Analyses/h7045a.APC.PDF

RELEVANT LITERATURE

Despite making strides in improving educational access for students with disabilities over the past few years, students identified in this way still graduate at significantly lower rates than their peers,⁹ face disproportionate disciplinary action in schools, experience more bullying, and are more likely to receive remedial course content from school staff who have low expectations for them.¹⁰ However, research suggests that access to the right instructional and emotional supports can close the gaps between these students and their peers.¹¹

In an effort to better serve students with disabilities, over the last decade the number of states offering vouchers to these groups of students has doubled.¹² While there have been research evaluations of parents' satisfaction with these programs,¹³ less is known about how parents navigate the process of choosing and using these scholarships. Previous studies of the Florida programs have also been limited to either survey data, administrative evaluations, or small samples of interview data. The use of multiple large-scale data sources to get an understanding of a family's journey through exercising school choice, particularly centering parents' own voices, is less common. Therefore, the focus, the scale, and the nature of this study will help provide valuable insights to policymakers, practitioners, and parents.

A previous statewide survey in Florida found that almost 9 in 10 participants in the McKay Scholarship program were satisfied with the school at which they used the scholarship, and that their children's academic and social experiences were improved at their new schools.¹⁴ While the study's findings are promising, its methodology did not compare participating parents with non-participating parents who also have students with disabilities. Nor did that survey examine the Gardiner program because it did not yet exist. This study provides an update of that previous work conducted in 2003.¹⁵ Moreover, other literature suggests parents' choices in schools are often constrained by their geography, social connections, and economic status.¹⁶ Though parents are satisfied with the programs overall, each family must consider and negotiate how a plethora of factors at each school—such as class size, individualized special education options, and accessible communication with teachers and other personnel—align with their child's needs.¹⁷

Previous research suggests that for families who are exercising school choice for the first time, finding the right school for their child provides both a new opportunity and new challenge. It involves the triumph of finding such a school and growing in the ability to choose well and feel empowered, but it also involves the trials of searching and trying out multiple schools to discern which is the most suitable.⁶ Cultivating support systems that enable families to find and belong to a school community is an important task,¹⁸ because constantly switching schools and being disconnected from a school community is associated with decreases in student motivation and performance, increases in feelings of alienation for students, and eroding opportunities for building trust and community between students and teachers.¹⁹ These are especially important considerations for students who are marginalized.

Taken together, previous studies suggest that the process is not as simple as getting involved with a scholarship program and finding a school.²⁰ Alongside reports about limited oversight of participating schools, a deeper understanding of participating families' experiences with finding appropriate schools and supplemental supports for their children becomes that much more important.

G www.crpe.org/publications/finding-great-fit-improving-school-choice-process-students-disabilities

METHOD

Building on previous research, including a 2003 evaluation of the McKay scholarship program,²¹ in early 2020 the [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](#), implemented a statewide mixed-methods examination of Florida parents' experiences [navigating](#) scholarship schools and supplemental supports and [satisfaction](#) with the Gardiner and McKay scholarships.

A statewide [survey](#) assessed the characteristics of eligible families who utilize the two scholarship programs compared to eligible families who do not utilize the programs; the types of services families are seeking for their children; and parental satisfaction with these statewide programs. The survey was distributed to all Florida parents who participated in either the McKay or Gardiner programs between 2017 and 2020, as well as a sample of scholarship-eligible non-participating parents from throughout the state. The survey was administered in June 2020, after families began feeling the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors asked specific questions about their school and supplemental support services both prior to and during the pandemic.

In-depth [individual and group interviews](#) with participating families complemented the survey, providing a deeper understanding of how students with disabilities and their families navigate and negotiate the opportunities that the two scholarship programs offer. Non-participating eligible families were not interviewed. The interviews were completed before mid-March 2020, when families would have begun feeling the impacts of COVID-19. Combined, these methods provide a robust picture of parents' experiences with the Gardiner and McKay scholarships.

Quantitative sample

A total of 3,881 families participated in the survey. Of these, 1,950 families utilized the McKay scholarship; 1,142 utilized the Gardiner scholarship; and 789 families were eligible for at least one of the scholarships, but did not participate in either the McKay or Gardiner programs.^H While the majority of all survey participants (73%) had a college degree or higher, a higher proportion of participants enrolled in either scholarship program had advanced degrees when compared to non-participants. Figure 1 displays demographics by scholarship type.

Qualitative sample

A total of 91 parents who have used the Gardiner or McKay scholarship participated in individual or group interviews, depending on their personal comfort level and availability, at a place convenient for the interviewee or over the phone. Interviewed families reported living in the following counties: Bay, Brevard, Broward, Clay, Columbia, Duval, Escambia, Hernando, Jefferson, Lake, Leon, Liberty, Manatee, Miami-Dade, Okaloosa, Orange, Osceola, Palm Beach, Pasco, Pinellas, Polk, Seminole, and Volusia.^I Parents were invited to attend both individual and group interview formats; seven parents chose to engage in both. Individual interviews averaged about 30 minutes and group interviews averaged 60 minutes. Parents were given a \$20 gift of appreciation for their time. Interviews were offered in English or Spanish, though all parents chose English. Figure 2 displays demographics by scholarship type.

^H A smaller sample of 323 Gardiner participants who homeschooled their children also responded to the survey.

^I 18 of these 23 counties are among the top 25 counties identified by Step Up for Students regarding student enrollment during the 2018-2019 academic year.

FIGURE 1: Survey demographics by scholarship type

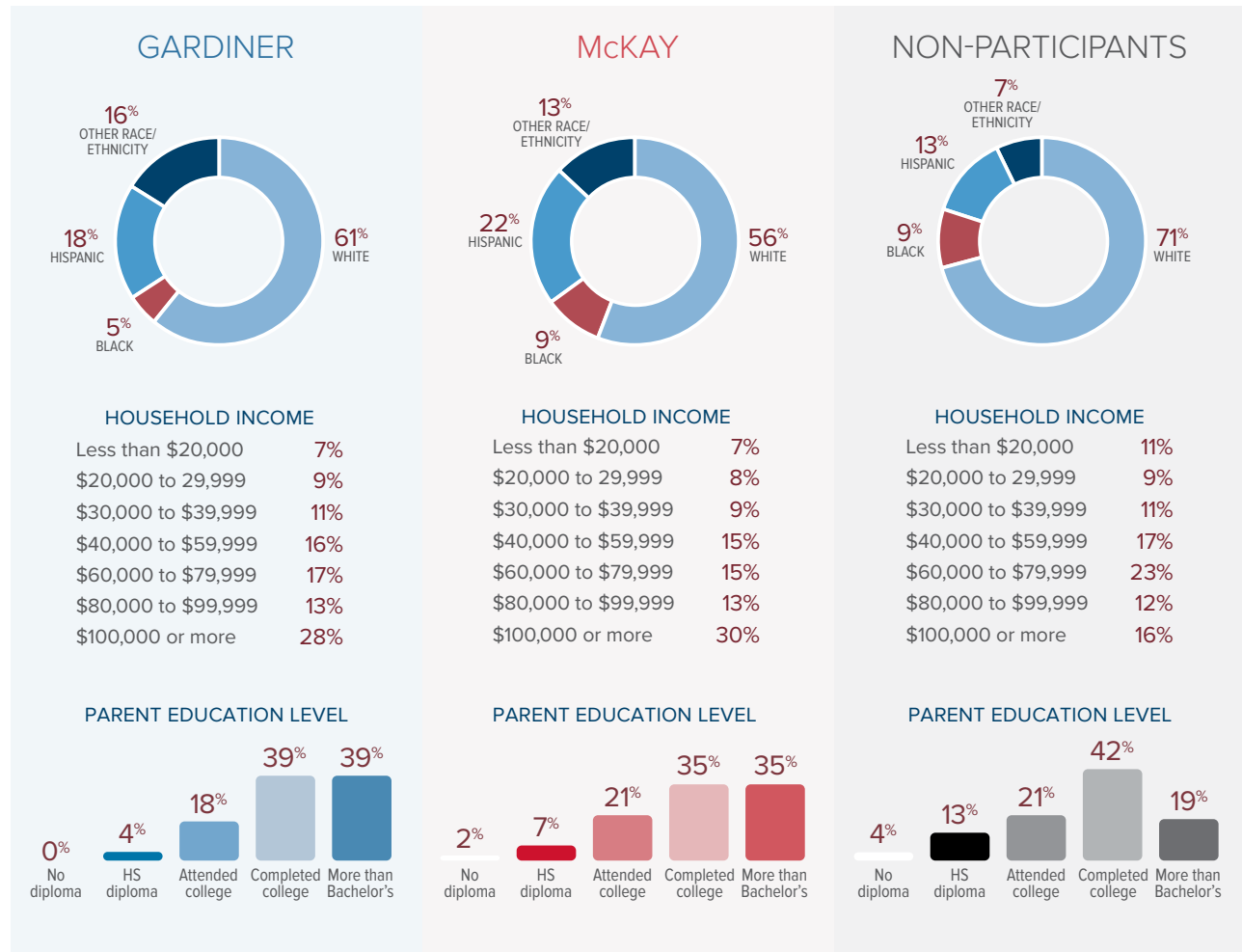
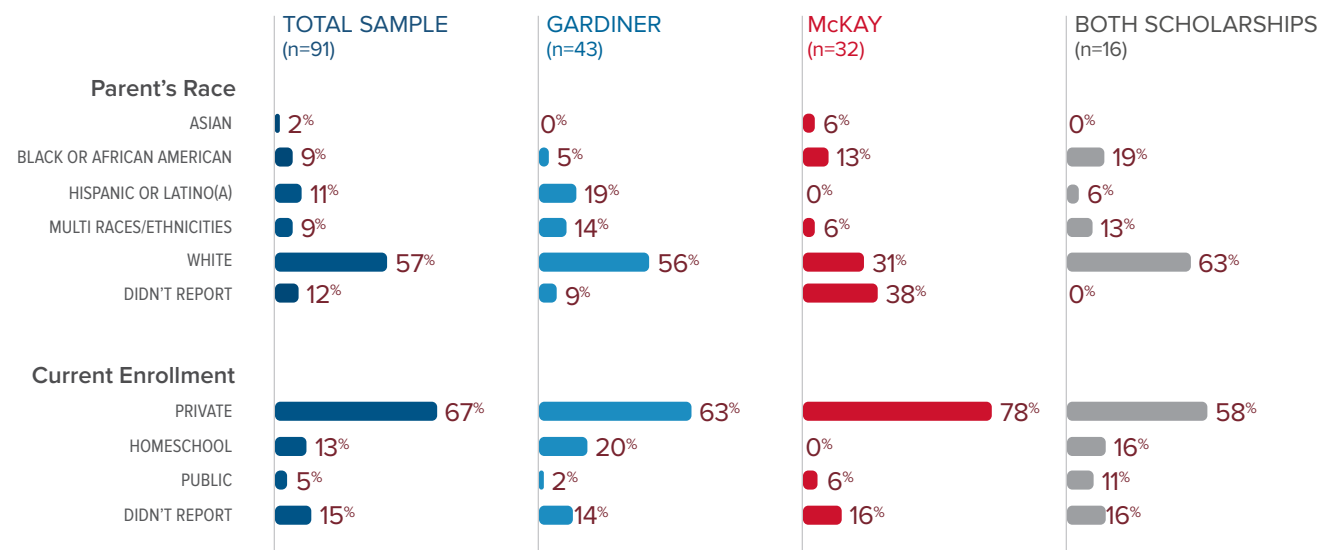


FIGURE 2: Qualitative sample demographics



FINDINGS

Survey and interview data reveal that parents of students who are eligible for the two scholarships feel that few school models (public or private) are able to meet their children's needs. The scholarships expand access to more schools than parents would be able to find or afford on their own; yet these expanded options, and the process to access and actually attend them, can overwhelm parents' available resources.^J Nevertheless, parents who find the right fit for their child are satisfied with the changes and benefits that ultimately result.

More specifically, findings from this mixed-method study show that:

- 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 (about 90%) of both Gardiner and McKay scholarship participants 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.

A complex journey, with layered constraints

Though parents explained in interviews how the scholarships expanded the educational options they could consider for their child, they also reported feeling their actual decision to enroll their child at any school was constrained by a number of individual, contextual, structural, and societal factors before they ever entered any scholarship school building. In fact, **almost a third of parents interviewed** felt their options were so constrained that their current scholarship school was the only viable option for their child.

“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

Parents described starting their school choice journey because they realized that the public school system (and most school models) are not designed for their children with disabilities to thrive. Most parents interviewed (more than 70%) felt compelled to search for better options when they perceived their child was not being appropriately accommodated, was not making academic gains where they could, or had their self-esteem negatively impacted by the lack of accommodation or the environment.

^J These findings are similar to studies of other school choice programs in Washington, D.C. and New Orleans: www.crpe.org/publications/finding-great-fit-improving-school-choice-process-students-disabilities

“ Her self-esteem was just getting impacted by her performance at school and... most of her kindergarten and first grade teachers were great and they did what they could but then you're dealing with classes with like 18 more kids so there's only but so much one on one attention they can give her. And then we started considering our options at that point. We're like, should we homeschool... what can we do? Because we don't want her to not want to learn. Because that will just follow you throughout life.”

McKay Scholarship Recipient, Seminole County

PARENTS GET INFORMATION, BUT NO MAP, FOR THE JOURNEY. After gaining one of the scholarships, parents describe learning about and considering a greater ecology of specialized private schools, teachers, staff, therapies, and accommodations for their children. However, parents also suggested that the information they are provided with upon receiving the scholarship is insufficient. Parents are given a lengthy list of school names and support services that accept the scholarship, without information to help them find an appropriate fit for their specific child's needs. For example, a parent in a certain county would see that there are a certain number of eligible schools within their area. This lack of clear and consistent information about each option leads parents to invest significant time to research school and support options and contributes to the number of transitions.

“ [H]ow did I become aware of the school? There is not a clearing house or a place that I could go to. For instance, I go online to Gardiner. And there's a... 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

While they are grateful for the expanded ecology of options, parents reported feeling overwhelmed by the prospect of having to determine which school/resource is the best option for their child. In fact, few parents describe feeling able to fully assess the schools and supplemental resources available to them as a result of the scholarship.

“ Well, I know that the list... When you go get it, the page, 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 whole 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

“LIKE A FULL-TIME JOB.” In the interviews, three quarters of participating parents described how the amount of time and effort needed to assess the fit of all the scholarship-schools or resources they are provided upon receiving the scholarship is **akin to a full-time job**. Some parents highlighted how this may pose as a barrier for parents who do not have significant time, capacity, or additional personal finances to fully engage in a lengthy touring or information searching process about the broader ecology of schools and resources they are provided.

Parents who did not already have a private school in mind at the time of applying for the scholarship (70% of interview respondents) described in depth what assessing the quality and fit of schools requires of the family, including research and information gathering in the form of phone calls with multiple schools to confirm what they offer versus what is said they offer on their website or other promotional materials, navigation of additional in-person and online resources, campus visits and tours, and lengthy trial periods of multiple schools for their children which might result in them not being able to move schools mid-year if the parent and child find the school is not the right fit after the trial period.

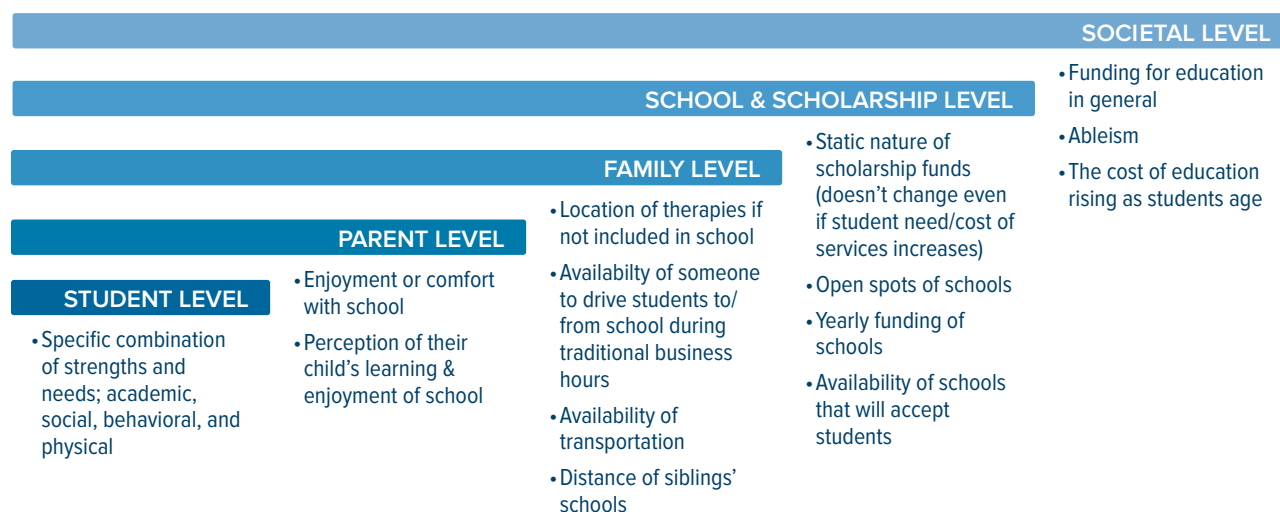
Parents are responsible for assessing the quality of the schools and whether they would be a good fit for their child's educational and social-emotional needs; considering whether each school's location is feasible in terms of transportation;

and determining whether they will need additional financial support—above and beyond the scholarship amount—in order to be able to enroll. This responsibility falls on the parent or primary caregiver, regardless of their level of experience or training with navigating choice options. These factors might make it difficult for all families to maximize the benefits of the scholarship they identified for themselves and their children. In interviews, parents suggested that these factors increase the likelihood that parents will tour or attend schools that are not the best fit for their children and result in switching multiple schools. In interviews, parents suggested that these factors increase the likelihood that parents will tour or attend schools that are not the best fit for their children and therefore can result in transitions between multiple schools.

“The scholarship is good—just depends on where you’re able to use it. And you know, the funding that they give you and if you know the amount of the funding, you know, because it’s all different for every town.”

McKay Scholarship Recipient, Duval County

FIGURE 3: Layered constrained school choice



SOME PARENTS SAY MULTIPLE SCHOOL TRANSITIONS CREATE ADDITIONAL STRESS. About a third of interviewed parents expressed frustration at what they viewed as having to undergo unnecessary school transitions in their journeys. They felt the transitions would have been less likely to occur if they were provided coordinated information or support assessing information and fit for each school or resource. Interviewed parents felt frustrated having to navigate resources while also considering and facing the additional constraints and challenges listed in figure 3. Nearly 20% of interviewed parents explicitly expressed that they felt they had to move scholarship schools either due to lack of resources or qualified personnel or a reduction in resources or qualified personnel. Parents expressed in interviews that they feel the transitions necessitated by removing their child from one learning environment to another learning environment in this journey can lead to unnecessary distress and learning loss for their children.

“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

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.

The survey data also suggest that trying out multiple schools is part of many families' school choice journeys. Two-thirds of participants enrolled in the McKay and Gardiner scholarships during the 2019–2020 school year reported considering more than one school. About one-quarter of parents surveyed reported some level of difficulty in finding their current scholarship school; almost all of them (90 percent) considered more than one school for their child. While some school transitions are typical, such as moving from elementary to middle school; even among elementary school students only, one-quarter used their scholarship to attend at least one other elementary school other than the one where they are currently enrolled.

Taken together, the interview and survey data illustrate why some parents might report difficulty utilizing the Gardiner and McKay scholarships. This finding is a concern given previous research that suggests that engaging in school choice requires parents of students with disabilities to “burden their already struggling child with removal, or they must remain in a school that does not adequately meet their child’s needs. In short, the acceptance of vouchers (and other school choice scholarships that facilitate moving schools) leaves parents operating with no legal safety net and few meaningful options when things go wrong.”²²

SOME FAMILIES CANNOT AFFORD TO CHOOSE, EVEN WITH THE SCHOLARSHIP.

Survey and interview data also revealed that once parents found a school or service that would be a good fit for their child, they were often faced with the realization that their chosen school or service might require additional funds. In fact, nearly three-quarters of McKay parents (74%) and more than half of Gardiner parents (54%) surveyed report paying out-of-pocket, above and beyond scholarship funds, for tuition or other educational resources/supports for their children. For both Gardiner and McKay recipients, the average additional cost was about \$3,000. 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. Financial resources proved to be a barrier to choice for those parents who could not afford the cost of tuition at their desired scholarship school.

“ Well, the thing is that I didn’t use it. Because that was the main issue with the Gardiner. When I got it, I was really excited. And when I saw the amount, which was \$10,500, I was like, ‘Oh my god, this is so cool.’ And we started looking around. And the closest [scholarship school] was about 25 miles from here. So that’s kind of far. But I still went on a tour. And everything was great. Until they told me the price. And the price for the tuition was \$20,000 for the year. And I was like, okay, you know, I can’t do that, you know, I can’t put the other 10 because I don’t have it... it was a lot of, like, what do I do? What do I do? What do I do? I ended up just not taking him out of school...”

Gardiner Scholarship Recipient, Manatee County

Most interviewed parents (80%) also noted that the cost of tuition and supplemental supports for students with disabilities exceeds the amount of funding provided by the scholarship. In the case of the Gardiner program, the lag time between paying a bill and receiving the state funds creates inequities between

parents who have access to discretionary funding and those who do not.

“I’m very satisfied with the service that Gardiner provides. Now, the challenges that we have experienced are mostly related to how slow they are. Okay. It takes quite a bit of time and I don’t know what their caseload is or how many applications for whatever they get. But we have found the turnaround is pretty slow. So when I pay my bill, it takes quite a long time before I get reimbursed. And then that can be problematic. We typically have enough money set aside that we’re able to deal with that. But I can see situations, particularly in more expensive situations, where families may not have that amount and they’re required to apply for reimbursement that it might be problematic. If I wasn’t in the job that I’m in, I could see where it would be challenging.”

Gardiner Scholarship Recipient, Polk County

The Gardiner and McKay scholarships provide financial support and the promise of a wider array of options for families who are facing the reality that any school, resource, curriculum, or tool labeled “special” has an added cost. However, parents also described that what’s required of them to fully access and use either scholarship requires compromises between what they envision for their child and what they can do.

TABLE 1: Sample pathways to and through scholarship journey

STARTING POINT	SCHOLARSHIP FUNCTION	ADDITIONAL STEPS	STATUS AT TIME OF INTERVIEW (October 2019–March 2020)
Parent hears about a school that has the specific supports and accommodations their child needs	Acts as a financial mechanism to get family enrolled in chosen school	Typically, one school transition	School match/positive experience
Parent is already attending a school with a positive experience, but it is financially straining	Scholarship eases financial burden and makes continued attendance in chosen school more feasible	None unless the school changes service	Stay in preferred school/positive experience
Parent has positive experience with previous school but due to shifting needs/age don’t know where to turn to next, especially around transition to middle school	Scholarship opens up awareness and access to broader landscape of options and eases financial burden of enrolling in chosen school or supplemental resource	At least one school transition, possibly multiple	School match/positive experience
Parent has a negative experience with previous school	Scholarship opens up awareness and access to broader landscape of options and eases financial burden of enrolling in chosen school or supplemental resource	At least one, possibly multiple transitions	School match/positive experience
Parent has a negative experience with previous school	Scholarship opens up awareness and access to broader landscape of options and eases financial burden of enrolling in chosen school or supplemental resource	Typically, multiple transitions	Parents are unhappy with scholarship school options they tried, and scholarship allows parents to homeschool (only Gardiner)
Parent has a negative experience with previous school	Scholarship opens up awareness and access to broader landscape of options but does not cover all costs	Typically, multiple transitions	Parents are unhappy with scholarship school options and are back in public school or unsatisfied in a scholarship school

Despite the struggles, parents are satisfied

Parents who feel they ultimately found the right fit for their child, regardless of the number of transitions to get there (over 50% of the interview sample), describe the scholarship journey as significantly improving their child's educational experience. Despite any struggle with the process of obtaining or using the Gardiner or McKay scholarships, all participating parents overwhelmingly feel grateful for the scholarships; more than 99% of McKay parents and 98% of Gardiner parents surveyed said the programs should continue. Parents were clear that their current satisfaction is inextricably tied to their ability to find a school where their children can thrive.

Based on survey findings as well as interview data, the majority of parents who participated in this mixed-methods study are satisfied with the McKay and Gardiner scholarship programs. Participating parents expressed higher levels of satisfaction than non-participating parents who were eligible for the scholarship. Interview responses provide overlapping descriptions of participating parents feeling that they had access to very little specialized support for their children before utilizing the Gardiner and McKay scholarships.

As shown in Table 2, the vast majority of participating parents surveyed (more than 90%) reported being satisfied with the teachers, academic expectations, order and discipline, and their interactions with staff at their current scholarship-supported schools.^K Across all these areas, families using the Gardiner scholarship to enroll their child in a private school indicated slightly higher levels of satisfaction than McKay families.^L

TABLE 2: **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%

COMPARING PARTICIPANT AND NON-PARTICIPANT SATISFACTION. Meanwhile, the proportion of satisfied non-participants was four to eleven percentage points lower than the proportion of satisfied participating families. For example, 91 percent of McKay participants and 94 percent of Gardiner families expressed satisfaction with their child's teachers. In comparison, about 87 percent of eligible non-participants expressed satisfaction with their child's teachers. Regarding the order and discipline at their child's school, 93 and 91 percent of Gardiner and McKay participants, respectively, expressed satisfaction compared to 82 percent of eligible non-participants. Similarly, 93 percent of Gardiner parents and 91 percent of parents reported being satisfied with the way their child's school interacts with parents. Among non-participants, 83 percent shared the same opinion.

K 323 Gardiner participants in the survey sample used their scholarship but did not enroll their child in a brick-and-mortar school. These participants are not included in the analysis of survey questions that ask about satisfaction with their child's school.

L The increased flexibility of the education savings account structure of the Gardiner scholarship may contribute to slightly higher levels of satisfaction, though this study lacks the data to test this hypothesis.

EXAMINING DIFFERENCES IN SATISFACTION BY PARENT INCOME, EDUCATION. Tables 3 and 4 display satisfaction rates by household income and parent's educational background to examine whether satisfaction differs by socioeconomic status. Among McKay participants, there seem to be slightly higher rates of satisfaction reported by those with household income greater than \$60,000 (the approximate median household income in Florida). However, there appears to be no difference in satisfaction rates by household income among Gardiner parents. When the sample of McKay and Gardiner parents is divided between those with and without a college degree, there is not much difference in satisfaction rates.

Notably, non-participants with household incomes greater than \$60,000 are generally more satisfied than non-participants with household incomes less than \$60,000. But the gaps are not always large. However, dividing the sample by educational background reveals greater gaps among non-participants. On the five dimensions of satisfaction that were included on the survey, **non-participating parents with a college degree** are five to ten percentage points more satisfied than non-participating parents without a college degree.

TABLE 3: **Satisfaction rates by income level**

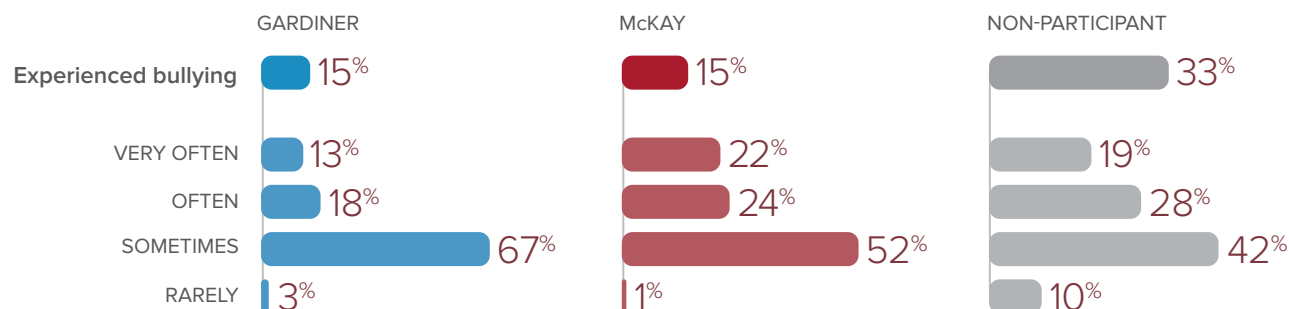
	MCKAY PARTICIPANTS		GARDINER ENROLLED		NON-PARTICIPANTS	
	< \$60,000	> \$60,000	< \$60,000	> \$60,000	< \$60,000	> \$60,000
The school your child attended this year	80%	93%	91%	93%	83%	88%
The teachers your child had this year	87%	92%	92%	94%	87%	87%
The academic expectations of the school	88%	91%	92%	91%	83%	88%
The order and discipline at the school	89%	92%	93%	92%	81%	84%
The way that school staff interacts with parents	89%	92%	92%	93%	84%	81%
The school's communication with your family	87%	91%	93%	90%	83%	84%
Your child's special needs teacher or therapist	82%	82%	85%	83%	80%	84%
The school's ability to accommodate your child's special needs	85%	88%	89%	90%	78%	86%
The school's commitment to help your child learn	88%	91%	94%	94%	85%	87%

TABLE 4: **Satisfaction rates by parent's education**

	MCKAY PARTICIPANTS		GARDINER ENROLLED		NON-PARTICIPANTS	
	No College Degree	College Degree	No College Degree	College Degree	No College Degree	College Degree
The school your child attended this year	90%	92%	91%	92%	79%	89%
The teachers your child had this year	91%	90%	91%	94%	83%	89%
The academic expectations of the school	88%	90%	92%	91%	81%	88%
The order and discipline at the school	90%	91%	90%	93%	77%	86%
The way that school staff interacts with parents	90%	91%	90%	92%	80%	85%
The school's communication with your family	89%	89%	91%	90%	77%	87%
Your child's special needs teacher or therapist	84%	81%	83%	84%	78%	85%
The school's ability to accommodate your child's special needs	87%	86%	89%	90%	75%	86%
The school's commitment to help your child learn	89%	90%	93%	93%	83%	88%

EXPLORING SATISFACTION WITH SPECIFIC DIMENSIONS OF THE SCHOOL EXPERIENCE. Survey questions also asked about satisfaction with specific aspects of the scholarship school experience. The higher satisfaction with school order and discipline among Gardiner and McKay parents, in particular, may also reflect the lower prevalence of bullying at their children’s scholarship schools. One third of non-participating parents of students with disabilities reported that their child was bullied because of their disability. The reported bullying rate by both Gardiner and McKay parents is half at 15 percent (see Figure 4). Among respondents who reported that their child was ever bullied, just under half of McKay participants and non-participants characterized the bullying as “often” or “very often.” A smaller proportion of Gardiner parents, about one-third, reported the same frequency of bullying.

FIGURE 4: **Child experienced bullying because of their disability**



Consistent with the quantitative survey results, more than half of the parents who were interviewed suggested that their experiences of teachers, academic expectations, order and discipline, and communication were much more positive, overall, in their scholarship schools than in non-scholarship schools.

“They cater to his dyslexia and have different programs and they discuss it with a parent... just the fact that the teachers are constantly in training to cater to what different behaviors their children have. [Communication is] also, night and day [from previous non-scholarship school]. I used to have to email the teachers daily and just constantly wouldn’t get answers back I mean, and again I understand these are teachers that are overworked and everything but he’s my only child. So, now that I am able to have [the scholarship school], it’s more like a family. The school at total has probably 35 kids so they’re all family and you’re able to talk to them even if it’s in the parking lot... and so it’s that kind of communication that happens and that feeling of everybody wants him to succeed, not just the parents.”

Gardiner Scholarship Recipient, Palm Beach County

Gardiner and McKay participants also expressed greater satisfaction with the ways their scholarship-eligible schools were meeting their child’s special needs (see Table 2). At least 90 percent of Gardiner participants indicated that they were satisfied with their school’s communication with their family, their child’s special needs teacher or therapist, the school’s ability to accommodate their child’s needs and their school’s commitment to help their child learn. McKay participants, as well as non-participants, also expressed high levels of satisfaction on these dimensions. However, Gardiner parents were most satisfied; satisfaction levels among Gardiner parents were about four percentage points higher than levels of McKay parents and up to 10 percentage points higher than levels of non-participating parents.

These results are shown in Table 3 by socioeconomic status. As can be seen in the table, there is little difference in satisfaction between McKay and Gardiner parents by income or highest degree obtained by parents. Among non-participants, satisfaction levels were more noticeably higher for higher-income parents or parents with college-degrees.

INQUIRING ABOUT PROVISION OF PROMISED SERVICES. In a separate survey question, families were asked if they were provided with all the promised and legally required services for their children. About eight out of every ten McKay and non-participating parents indicated that their child’s school provided all such services. The rate was slightly higher

“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... I mean, 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

for Gardiner parents; nine out of every ten reported that their child received all promised and legally required services. Among the small proportion of respondents who reported a shortfall in services, one-fifth of Gardiner and non-participating parents described the shortfall as “very serious,” as opposed to “somewhat serious” or “not too serious.” Upwards of one-third of McKay parents who experienced a shortfall in service described it as “very serious.”

Beyond satisfaction: Greater involvement, confidence, and peace of mind

Beyond their satisfaction with scholarship school experiences, 90% of Gardiner and McKay parents surveyed agreed that using the scholarship made them feel more in charge of their child’s education, led to greater involvement in their child’s education, gave them peace of mind that their child’s needs were met, and increased their confidence in their ability to choose what is best for their child.

“I think it opened up a whole avenue of feeling like I didn’t have to have him stay in a setting that I felt like he wasn’t going to be successful in. And without it. I don’t think he’d be where he is today. I absolutely don’t think so... I feel like it’s opened up a whole option, the option of giving my son something better for him to be successful to have a better life to get the education he needs so he can become, you know, a functional successful adult.”

McKay Scholarship Recipient, Clay County

Interviews with participating parents might shed light on the high rate of satisfaction reported among Gardiner and McKay survey participants. In interviews, nearly all parents who felt they ultimately found the right fit or resource for their child described witnessing transformative changes in their children after engaging with their current scholarship school. Parents frequently used language such as “night and day,” “leaps and bounds,” and “game changing” to describe the changes they saw in their children after they started attending a school with one of the scholarships.

Though interviewed parents describe believing their children could be doing better when they sought out the scholarship, more than half were surprised at the speed at which their child displayed changes once placed in their new school with the scholarship. Additionally, parents felt that because of the changes, their children had more opportunities socially, educationally, and vocationally.

“We do play dates. We never did play dates before, because it was... Now he has friends. We do play dates. Now, we go to the playground, and we go to the store without suffering. We can go to restaurants. You cannot believe how the program [has improved] his speech. He’s been in speech therapy for two years [with little improvement], and then we started in [scholarship] school, and after a week I actually started to understand him. So now we have conversations... It’s a totally different kid.”

Gardiner Scholarship Recipient, Miami-Dade County



Parents describe in interviews how these transformative changes and new opportunities for their children also led to opportunities and life-altering changes for the whole family. Many parents expressed shifts in expectations for their children and themselves after finding their current school with the scholarship.

“ I [now] have faith in education for a child like mine. He has a lower IQ, he has delays and he has ADHD. He has autism, he’s on the spectrum. So what I would normally think is that there is no place in the world, I would have to take care of him all my life. And the only way that I wouldn’t take care of him is if he could get a job and he could get a skill or education enough to take care of himself. So just having access to that, it’s huge. Now I actually have faith in the education system and it helps me to talk to my other kids’ teachers... So that advocates stuff that I had learned from McKay, helps me with my other kids.”

McKay Scholarship Recipient, Orange County

Parents are satisfied when they are able to find and access a scholarship school they feel can serve their child. However, parents were also clear that these transformative changes and benefits do not come easily. Further, these benefits might not be shared by all parents eligible for the Gardiner and McKay scholarship programs. Despite the complications, parents overwhelmingly recommend that the scholarship programs continue with modifications that would reduce barriers to using or fully benefiting from the scholarship. These include more consistent and accessible information, a more transparent process pre- and post-scholarship award, and a higher degree of accountability that could increase their confidence in the quality of available programs.

IMPLICATIONS

The intention of school choice programs is to empower families to choose an educational experience that is the best fit for their child. In practice, though, not all options are of equal quality or fit, and not all families may be able to take advantage of the promise that these programs offer. Choices are especially complex and high-stakes for parents of children who have specialized learning needs. This report adds to the conversation by centering the experiences of parents as they seek the best educational options for their children who are eligible for two specific scholarship programs.

As the state is poised to expand school choice, there is no better time to ensure that the expanded scholarship programs are more widely accessible and do not result in furthering educational and economic inequities. The report's findings raise several considerations for policymakers, other decision makers, parents and researchers.

- **Equip parents with user-friendly, robust resources that help them 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 some questions to ask and other observations to make when choosing a school²³ could help them evaluate a school and its program offerings and get the most out of their school visits. The authors encourage state policymakers, school networks, and scholarship management organizations to consider how to collaborate to provide such a resource together.
- **Level the playing field to create more equitable access.** Families with fewer resources, financial and otherwise, experience greater barriers to fully utilizing the scholarships. For example, interviewed parents said that the most common way they learned about the scholarships was through the private school their child was already attending. More research is necessary to understand other sources that parents relied on for information, and whether all eligible parents are aware of their expanded educational options. Scholarship management organizations could also create additional community, family, and work-based connections to broaden the kinds of trusted sources where parents could learn about the scholarships.

Moreover, this study identified disparities in how much parents spend beyond their scholarship on education. The authors encourage further study of how this affects lower-income families, and urge policymakers and scholarship management organizations to consider how to create more equitable access to specialized services when the cost exceeds the family's financial resources.

- **Critically examine transitions between school levels, especially to and from middle school.** In both private and public schools, natural transitions that occur between elementary and middle school and middle to high school pose an additional challenge to families of children with specialized learning needs. In this report, a common theme that emerged across parent interview narratives 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 children's specialized learning needs due to the increasing class sizes and lack of individualized services. Parents also reported that sometimes their child's elementary school teachers indicated it would be difficult for the child's needs to be met in public middle school. Future research should look closely at transitions, and provide resources to parents to help them evaluate the best learning environment for their child at each age and stage.
- **Continue to improve schools' accountability to parents and to other oversight agencies.** 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.

Future research could look with a critical lens at whether schools are providing the level and quality of services promised and if, for example, certain schools have a low “stick rate”²⁴—regularly unenrolling students at atypical times or are taking advantage of the scholarship. The authors recommend that policymakers and other community leaders connected to McKay and Gardiner families reflect on how to be better advocates in instances where service falls short of expectations.

School choice is both popular and controversial. To truly understand whether it is improving the lives of children with disabilities, policymakers, education leaders, and other decision makers need to hear the voices of a diverse group of constituents who are eligible for these programs. Continuing to examine the quality of families' experiences, as well as the affective and cognitive outcomes for students with disabilities, is an important investment alongside the public funding flowing to families and scholarship management organizations.

Parents' descriptions of why they pursue school choice also points to the need to look closely at how students with disabilities are supported in public schools. Scholarships and vouchers are one way to allow families to find the right fit. Another way would be to enrich the available experiences in public schools for children with disabilities, reducing parents' frustration and offering a more scalable solution for equitable, high-quality education.

Participants in this study express satisfaction with specific characteristics of their private school, home school, and supplemental support experiences, including individualized attention, quality of services, accessibility, and a focus on their child's social-emotional needs. All schools, public and private, can benefit from reflecting on how they are providing learning experiences for their students.

CONCLUSION

In Spring 2021, as this report is being released, 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.^M This report 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 the program is expanded, 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.

M www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2021/7045/BillText/e1/PDF; www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2021/7045/Analyses/h7045a.APC.PDF

APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

The CERES Institute for Children and Youth at Boston University and the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas implemented a statewide mixed-methods examination of:

- Florida parents' satisfaction with the Gardiner and McKay scholarships;
- Parents' experiences navigating scholarship schools and supplemental supports; and
- Parents' feedback or suggested improvements about the process.

A statewide survey assessed the characteristics of eligible families who utilize the two scholarship programs compared to those who do not, the types of services families are seeking for their children, and parental satisfaction with these statewide programs. The survey was distributed to all Florida parents who participated in either the McKay or Gardiner programs between 2017 and 2020, as well as a random sample of scholarship-eligible non-participating parents. In-depth interviews with families were conducted to complement the survey, providing a deeper understanding of how students with disabilities and their families navigate and negotiate their schools and supports. Combined, these methods provide a robust picture of parents' experiences with the Gardiner and McKay scholarships.

Quantitative sample

A survey was administered in June 2020 to all Florida parents who have ever participated in either the McKay or Gardiner programs between 2017 and 2020. The survey included questions asking parents for their opinions on a variety of topics including their experiences participating in the programs and satisfaction with the educational services that they received. Parents were also asked to assess how their schools handled the COVID-19 pandemic. In an effort to obtain an accurate comparison group, the same survey was administered to a sample of families who live throughout Florida who have children with special needs but do not participate in either the McKay or Gardiner programs.

Similar to a previous survey of McKay Scholarship participants, the research team chose to focus on non-academic outcomes including parental satisfaction across a breadth of measures, instances of bullying, and out of pocket expenses. The survey did not assess academic outcomes.

This study builds upon Greene and Forster's work in multiple ways. First, it includes Gardiner families. The Gardiner scholarship did not exist during the first evaluation. Second, Greene and Forster used former McKay participants as their comparison sample. This report includes a comparison group of families who have never participated in either program, which is more rigorous than previous examinations. Third, this study was able to capture data from homeschooling families who use the Gardiner Education Savings Accounts to supplement home instruction. Homeschooling families are typically difficult to capture in data given cultural preferences to not be counted. Fourth, given the unintended timing of the survey distribution, critical data about the early months of COVID-19 and how Floridian private and public schools were handling the pandemic were also assessed. Finally, in partnership with the Florida Department of Education, the research team attempted to locate and survey all families who had ever participated in McKay and Gardiner from the years of 2017 through 2020.

A total of 4,135 families participated in the survey, of which 1,950 families utilized the McKay scholarship, 1,396 utilized the Gardiner scholarship (of which 323 were homeschooled), and 789 families were eligible for at least one of the scholarships but did not participate in either the McKay or Gardiner programs. Figure 1 refers to demographics by scholarship type. While the majority of all survey participants (73%) had a college degree or higher, a higher proportion of participants enrolled in either scholarship program had advanced degrees when compared to non-participants.

TABLE 5: Quantitative Survey Demographics

	GARDINER ENROLLED	MCKAY PARTICIPANTS	NON-PARTICIPANTS
ETHNIC/RACIAL BACKGROUND			
White	61%	56%	71%
Black	5%	9%	9%
Hispanic	18%	22%	13%
Other Race/Ethnicity	16%	13%	7%
PARENT EDUCATION LEVEL			
No High School Diploma	0%	2%	4%
High school Diploma	4%	7%	13%
Attended College	18%	21%	21%
Completed College	39%	35%	42%
More than Bachelor's Degree	39%	35%	19%
HOUSEHOLD INCOME			
Less than \$20,000	7%	7%	11%
\$20,000 to 29,999	9%	8%	9%
\$30,000 to \$39,999	11%	9%	11%
\$40,000 to \$59,999	16%	15%	17%
\$60,000 to \$79,999	17%	15%	23%
\$80,000 to \$99,999	13%	13%	12%
\$100,000 or more	28%	30%	16%
MARITAL STATUS			
Married	75%	70%	68%
LANGUAGE SPOKEN AT HOME			
English	94%	91%	95%

Qualitative sample

The research team recruited the qualitative sample by working with Florida-based organizations that have ties to scholarship families and schools. [Step Up for Students](#), one of two state approved organizations to administer Gardiner funds, and the [McKay Coalition](#), a coalition of schools that accept the McKay Scholarship, provided feedback on recruitment materials and strategy. Step Up for Students provided an informational flyer to their parent council and to parent groups on social media. The McKay Coalition emailed an informational flyer to all the schools that are a part of the coalition and provided a message in their parent newsletter about the study. Additionally, the research team directly emailed information about the study to each school that is a part of the McKay Coalition; and asked our Florida-based field interviewers, with backgrounds in education, to inform their networks about the study.

Individual interviews averaged thirty minutes (ranging from 15 minutes to 84 minutes) and occurred at a place of the parents' choosing—e.g., their home, their child's school, virtually, or another close public location of their choosing. Group interviews averaged 60 minutes and occurred at a school that was central to all participants of each group. Parents were given a \$20 gift card in appreciation for their time. The interviews were conducted before March 2020, when families would have begun feeling the impacts of COVID-19.

Interested parents were directed to fill out pre-interview information at a link on the flyer or to email the research team. The pre-interview survey was accessible by phone, tablet, and computer and asked information that would help with scheduling in-person interviews, such as location, scholarship utilized, and language preference. Interviews were offered in English or Spanish, though all parents chose English. Interviews were conducted by one of three field-based interviewers, located in the North, Central, and Southern regions of Florida as well as by the research team across two site visits to the North and Central regions of Florida. Interviewed families reported living in the following counties: Bay, Brevard, Clay, Duval, Escambia, Hernando, Jefferson, Leon, Manatee, Miami-Dade, Okaloosa, Orange, Palm Beach, Seminole, Pasco, Polk, Pinellas, Lake.

In total, 183 parents completed the pre-interview interest survey and 91 parents participated. We invited parents to attend both individual and group interview formats and seven participants chose to engage in both. Individual interviews averaged thirty minutes (ranging from 15 minutes to 84 minutes) and occurred at a place of the parents choosing, such as their home, their child's school, virtually, or another public location that would only require five minutes of travel time. Group interviews averaged 60 minutes and occurred at a school that was central to all participants of each group. Parents were given a \$20 gift card to express appreciation for their time.

TABLE 6: Qualitative Sample Demographics

	GARDINER (N=43)	MCKAY (N=32)	BOTH SCHOLARSHIPS (N=16)	TOTAL SAMPLE (N=91)
ETHNIC/RACIAL BACKGROUND				
White	56%	31%	63%	57%
Hispanic or Latino(a)	19%	0%	6%	11%
Black or African American	5%	13%	19%	9%
Asian	0%	6%	0%	2%
Multiple races/ethnicities	14%	6%	13%	9%
Didn't report	9%	38%	0%	12%
AGE OF CHILD				
Age 4–11	61%	36%	41%	51%
Age 12–14	16%	23%	27%	20%
Age 15–17	18%	32%	23%	22%
Age 18	6%	9%	9%	7%
DO YOU SPEND OUT-OF-POCKET ON YOUR CHILD'S EDUCATION?				
Yes	74%	81%	88%	80%
ENROLLMENT STATUS				
Private	63%	78%	58%	67%
Homeschool	20%	—	16%	13%
Public	2%	6%	11%	5%
Didn't report	14%	16%	16%	15%

All interviews were audio recorded, with consent, and transcribed. Each transcript was checked for accuracy and coded by one member of the research team and checked by another member. The research team coded inductively for factors that parents looked for in scholarship schools, descriptions of their experiences obtaining and using the scholarship(s), benefits of the scholarship(s), barriers of the scholarship(s), and common issues that arose during their school choice journey.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Hess, Molina, Kozleski, 2006; Kalyanpur & Harry, 2004
- 2 EdChoice.org, 2021 www.edchoice.org/school-choice/types-of-school-choice/education-savings-account/
- 3 Fiddiman & Yin, 2019 www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2019/05/13/469610/danger-private-school-voucher-programs-pose-civil-rights/
- 4 www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/05/17/527938057/for-families-with-special-needs-vouchers-bring-choices-not-guarantees
- 5 ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbprofallNSrt?Rep=VFL
- 6 www.fldoe.org/schools/school-choice/facts-figures.stml
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- 8 See EdChoice.org, “What is an education savings account?” www.edchoice.org/school-choice/types-of-school-choice/education-savings-account/
- 9 NCES.ed.gov, 2020 nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cg.asp
- 10 Horowitz, Rawe, & Whittaker, 2017
- 11 Achieve, 2013
- 12 EdSource, 2020
- 13 Holmes Erickson, 2017; Rhinesmith, 2017
- 14 Green & Forster, 2003
- 15 Green & Forster, 2003
- 16 Bell, 2009; Bell, 2007; Center on Online Learning and Students with Disabilities, 2016; Cheng & Peterson, 2021; Rich & Jennings, 2015
- 17 Holmes Erickson, 2017; Finn, Caldwell, and Raub 2006; Weidner and Harrington 2006; Hensel, 2015
- 18 Stewart & Wolf, 2014
- 19 Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Lee & Smith, 2001
- 20 Usman, 2014
- 21 Greene & Forster, 2003
- 22 Hensel, 2015, pg. 332
- 23 Usman, 2014
- 24 Usman, 2014

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The CERES Institute for Children & Youth at Boston University Wheelock College of Education & Human Development is dedicated to community-engaged research and evaluation. Our work is premised on the belief that the best solutions for strengthening programs for children, youth, and families emerge by authentically partnering the expertise in communities with the expertise of community-engaged researchers and evaluators. Through a co-constructive process, communities and community-engaged researchers can identify the core problems that young people are facing, design solutions that capitalize on the inherent assets of young people and their communities, and continually learn and improve on these solutions until positive education and life outcomes are realized for all. Importantly, these partnerships should result in community-based organizations building their internal capacity to learn and improve.

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