

## Expanding Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts *Why Florida Needs More of a Good Thing*

**William Mattox**

*Director of The J. Stanley Marshall Center for  
Educational Options, The James Madison Institute*

Six years ago, when Katie Swingle's son was only 18 months old, a doctor reported that her boy's autism would probably prevent him from ever being able to speak. Today, Katie's son is not only communicating orally, but he's also writing – in cursive! And Katie, who testified in front of the Senate earlier this year, says the Florida Legislature is partly to thank.

That's because a group of forward-looking Florida legislators adopted an innovative new policy called Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts (PLSAs) in 2014. These flexible accounts enable parents of children with unique abilities to "customize" their child's education by choosing from a wide array of instructional materials, classroom programs, tutorial services, learning therapies, and the like.

Importantly, Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts fill several gaps not covered by Florida's

well-established (and well-regarded) McKay Scholarships for special needs students. For starters, PLSAs are available to students who haven't completed a year at public school (provided the parents get a licensed doctor to certify that their child has a qualifying disability). This proved very important to Katie and her husband since their son's public school experience was extremely short-lived.

"We started with Kindergarten, and within a week I knew we were in trouble," Katie told a Florida legislative panel recently. "It wasn't the school's fault – they did everything they could to help me." But since her child's unique needs were "impossible" for the local public school to address, Katie withdrew him (and in so doing lost the opportunity to qualify for a McKay Scholarship after a year).

Thanks to the



Adriana Mantilla of Kendall gets a hug from her autistic son, Armando. Traditional school was a challenge for Armando, but his \$10,000 scholarship from a new Florida program will help defray homeschooling and other expenses. *(Peter Andrew Bosch / Miami Herald)*

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Personal Learning Scholarship Account program, the Swingles weren't left out in the cold. Instead, they were able to deposit into a PLSA the per-pupil tax dollars that would have otherwise been spent for their son to attend public school. With the PLSA, the Swingles were able to pay for their son's tuition at Woodland Hall Academy, a private school in Leon County that specializes in educating students with unique challenges. In addition, they were able to pay for their son's speech therapy, tutoring and applied behavior analysis therapy. (ABA therapy has proved very beneficial in meeting the developmental needs of children with autism.)

For the 2014-15 school year, the average scholarship award for PLSA students is roughly \$10,000. This amount varies according to grade, county and disability. Understandably, students with the most severe disabilities qualify for the highest per-pupil funds – just as they would if they were enrolled in the public school classroom.

Like the Swingles, more than 1,700 Florida families have benefited from the freedom and flexibility PLSAs offer. (See Florida newspaper op-eds on pg. 3 and 4.) And many more would like to do so. In the year since the law passed, more than 5,000 Florida families have applied to the program – and interest in the program shows no signs of slowing down.

One of the reasons PLSAs have generated so much enthusiasm is because, unlike McKay Scholarships, Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts can be used to buy “unbundled” educational services from multiple providers. In fact, the list of authorized uses for PLSA funds includes any combination of the following:

- **Instructional materials**, including digital technology devices that help a student access educational content;
- **Curriculum**, which is defined as a complete course

of study for a particular content area or grade level;

- **Specialized services** offered by an authorized provider, including speech therapy, physical therapy, applied behavior analysis, hearing aids and occupational therapy;
- **Tuition** to enroll in an eligible private school, the Florida Virtual School or some other approved online program, an eligible post-secondary educational institution, or an authorized **tutoring** program;
- **Assessment fees** for nationally-standardized, norm-referenced achievement tests, Advanced

Placement tests, industry certification exams and other assessments;

- **College savings** via the Florida Prepaid College Program; and
- **Contracted services** provided by a public school or school district, including classes taken as a non-enrolled student.

As one might imagine, having the flexibility to obtain “unbundled” services is particularly important to students with unique abilities since many schools aren't equipped to meet certain needs. Of course, as we will see later, many

“regular” students would also benefit from the kind of flexibility PLSAs provide – and these students should get more and more attention from Florida lawmakers in years to come.

## The Immediate Priority

For now, state lawmakers need to give priority to expanding Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts to help more students with special needs. Indeed, several reforms are especially needed.

First, lawmakers need to **expand eligibility to cover a broader range of student disabilities**. Currently, the PLSA program covers K-12 students with Down syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy, spina

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Katie Swingle, mother of a son with autism, testified in front of the Senate Education Appropriations Committee earlier this year. (*The Florida Channel*)

## Helping a Child Be the Best He Can

Published November 13, 2014

By Lisa Hazelton

My son, Nate, is a child with Down syndrome. He brightens faces wherever he goes. He is a blessing to our entire family and really just a happy kid who loves football, playing outside, hiking and music.

Nate can turn just about anything into his air guitar.

My dreams for Nate are the same I have for each of my children. I want Nate to be the best version of himself he can be.

Like any parent, I want my son to have every opportunity to succeed in life. He faces more challenges than others when it comes to his educational path, and I want to do everything in my power to make sure he has a quality education, so he can fulfill the purpose for which he was created.

Thanks to a new scholarship—a Personal Learning Scholarship Account, or PLSA—for Florida kids with special needs, Nate will have a more customized learning experience and we'll be able to do more of the things that are working for him.

Like many children with Down syndrome, Nate has low tone and the motor development delays that accompany it. He also has cognitive delays.

We have learned that while it might take Nate a lot longer to learn something, he can and does learn well.

As a Florida home-schooled child, Nate will be able to utilize his PLSA funds toward things like therapists, curriculum, support tools, even toward college.

It will help break down barriers for him and further ensure he's equipped for a bright future.

Since Nate was very small, we have been blessed by a tremendously talented team of therapists at Pediatric Therapy Services in Lakeland.

In the past, we have had to alternate our schedule of therapies, since only our physical therapy was covered by insurance.

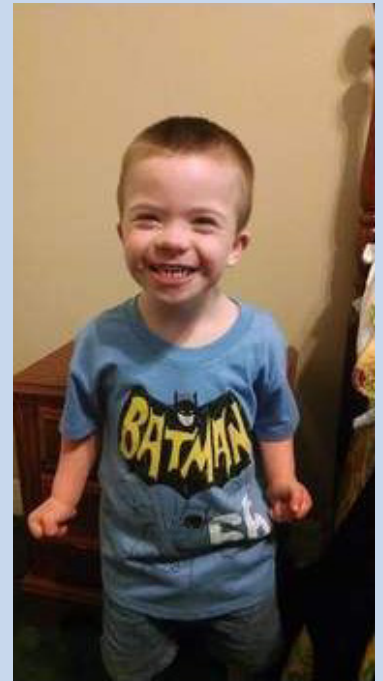
With the PLSA, we will be able to establish a much more consistent schedule involving physical therapy, occupational therapy and speech therapy.

Children with Down syndrome can learn. Like all children, they might learn differently. There might be different methods or tactics that need to be tried to figure out what motivates them. Every child is special, has value and deserves the best education we can possibly provide.

I encourage more families of kids with special needs to learn about PLSAs, eligibility requirements and how to apply for the scholarship.

Florida K-12 public, private and home education students with Down syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, Williams syndrome, and Prader-Willi syndrome are eligible.

*Lisa Hazelton of Lakeland is a mother of nine children, including six-year-old Nate. This article originally appeared in the Nov. 13, 2014 edition of The Lakeland Ledger. Link to article: <http://www.theledger.com/article/20141113/COLUMNISTS03/141119814>.*



## Special-needs kids will soar with new scholarship money

Published July 17, 2014

By Julie Kleffel

Like every parent, I want my child to be as successful as possible in her education and in life. But the path to success for my daughter, Faith, will look different than that of most kids.

Faith is a child with Down syndrome. Her unique abilities are what make her so special; yet they pose challenges to our family when it comes to her path through the school system in Florida. Thankfully, because of a new scholarship now available for Florida students with disabilities, I will be able to create a customized education plan to help Faith succeed.

As a family, we will be able to select the best school, services and therapies to fit Faith's unique needs.

We faced many challenges early in her life. Because of hearing issues, Faith's speech was delayed, and we had to communicate through sign language. We also questioned whether she would ever be able to walk. It was a scary time.

With much one-on-one tutoring and many hours spent in therapy, Faith has blossomed. Today she is a bubbly 7-year-old in choir. She can read, write and do basic math. Not only can Faith walk, she can run three miles and is on a swim team.

Faith has made these strides with the help of one-on-one instruction to focus on the areas where she needs the most help.

When she was enrolled in preschool, Faith wasn't receiving the attention she needed. In total, she was getting as little as five to seven minutes of individualized speech therapy each week, and speech articulation was our biggest challenge.

After that year of preschool, I decided to educate Faith at home so she could have an individualized education and one-on-one focus she needed from her teacher. Now she gets an hour of speech therapy twice a week.

As a widow and the sole provider for Faith, home schooling and paying out of pocket for therapy has been financially difficult. We've had to make tough choices and limit therapies at times — services that would have helped.

But this school year, things will be different for Faith. This year, we are applying for a Personal Learning Scholarship Account, and I hope more parents of kids with unique abilities will take a moment to learn more and apply.

The PLSA is different from other state scholarships because it lets moms and dads whose kids are not in



public schools direct funds toward any combination of programs — schools, therapists, specialists, curriculum, technology, even a college savings account — that the parents think will provide the best path to their child's educational success. The right combination of support can help unlock education opportunities, and parents know what combination is best for their kids.

These scholarships empower moms and dads of students with disabilities with the flexibility to create education plans custom-made for their children — plans to help these unique boys and girls succeed in school and in everyday life.

PLSAs will be life-changing for my family and potentially thousands of others in our state.

Students like Faith with Down syndrome — and others with autism, cerebral palsy, Prader-Willi syndrome, spina bifida, Williams syndrome, and select intellectual disabilities — can apply for the scholarship. Also, kindergartners deemed high risk because of developmental delays are eligible.

For my family, a PLSA will mean Faith can maintain the speech therapies that are working so well for her, and we can increase or add to them as needed with things like physical or occupational therapy.

I am excited and hopeful to see how Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts will help my daughter — and many other Florida students — find their perfect path to success.

*Julie Kleffel of Longwood is the sole caregiver for her 7-year-old daughter with Down syndrome. This article originally appeared in the July 17, 2014 edition of The Orlando Sentinel. Link to article: <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/features/education/os-disabled-students-voucher-program-20140731-story.html>.*

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bifida, Williams syndrome, Prader-Willi syndrome and severe cognitive impairment. Kindergarten students identified as “high-risk” are also eligible.

Going forward, eligibility needs to be expanded to include all students on the autism spectrum – including those with Asperger’s syndrome – rather than just those diagnosed with autism. In addition, eligibility needs to be extended to students with muscular dystrophy, cystic fibrosis, dyslexia, ADHD, multiple sclerosis, blindness and a number of other disabilities.

Second, lawmakers need to **triple the dollars allocated to the program to accommodate more students**. In the first year of the program, the state appropriated \$18.4 million to serve roughly 1,800 students (on a first-come, first-served basis). Given the interest the program has generated – and the need to expand the range of student disabilities covered – lawmakers should now look to increase PLSA funding levels for 2015-16 to at least \$50 million (as the Senate has proposed) rather than just \$31.9 million (as the House has proposed).

Third, lawmakers need to **ensure the program’s administrative sustainability** by allowing scholarship funding organizations to collect a 5 percent fee to defray their administrative costs. In year one, no such administrative monies were allocated. This meant that the private organizations helping to get the PLSA program off the ground had to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars in donations to

administer the program. Obviously, continuing that practice does not put the PLSA program on a sustainable path.

It’s important to recognize that the state of Florida would be paying these administrative costs if PLSAs were run out of the Department of Education (DOE). In Arizona, where the first program of this kind was adopted, the state DOE runs the program; yet, several outside observers have indicated that administering the program through private scholarship funding organizations is one of the features of the Florida law that makes it superior to Arizona’s. For example, in a recent analysis published in *National Affairs*, Lindsay Burke of the Heritage Foundation and Jason Bedrick of the Cato Institute wrote that having these programs run by private scholarship funding organizations who are dedicated to this purpose increases the likelihood that students and parents will be well served and that the program will remain a high priority.

### Making PLSAs Universal

To their credit, House Speaker Steve Crisafulli and Senate President Andy Gardiner have made PLSA expansion a major priority of the 2015 legislative session. And certainly no one could find fault with the emphasis they have placed on serving students with unique abilities. As President Gardiner has said, “These accounts provide important financial resources parents can utilize to make certain our students receive a customized education tailored to their own unique abilities.”



Students, parents and religious leaders in Tallahassee share their support for school choice options. (*The News Service of Florida & News Flash Politics*)



The crowd cheers a during a speech at the official National School Choice Week kickoff. (Smiley N. Pool / Houston Chronicle)

Going forward, House and Senate leaders will want to look for ways to expand PLSAs to the general population of students. That's because flexible learning accounts promise benefits to all sorts of students. Indeed, in our Digital Age, we ought to be looking to "customize" and "individualize" learning for all students in accordance with their unique needs, interests, aptitudes and learning styles.

The most obvious next place to expand PLSAs would be with the high school population, since students preparing for the transition to college and career have very different learning needs depending on their post-graduation plans. The most sensible way to begin here would be to offer a relatively small amount of funds to this relatively large population of students (rather than a large amount of money to a small population of students).

**Imagine, for example, how well Florida high school students might be served if the \$261 per-pupil spending increase Gov. Scott has proposed for the 2015-16 school year were deposited into a Personal Learning Scholarship Account specifically for each individual student.** With such a "mini PLSA," their parents could purchase for them online courses, extra electives, SAT Prep programs, tutoring services, Rosetta Stone software, summer courses or a number of other supplemental learning resources.

Imagine, too, what the response might be if we were to ask parents this question: Would you prefer to see any future increases in per-pupil spending go into a personal learning account for your child that

you control – or into the general education budget that your local school board controls?

My hunch is that most parents would prefer to have a personal learning account that they could use to purchase educational resources tailored to meet their child's unique needs. Moreover, I suspect most Florida taxpayers would prefer to see future increases in per-pupil spending controlled by parents rather than by school boards – especially once they realize that PLSAs are structured to maximize "bang-for-buck" in education. That is, since parents can roll over any unused PLSA funds to the following year (or put these monies into a prepaid college savings account), families have every incentive to seek the

highest possible quality in education for the lowest possible price.

As such, PLSAs are superior to all other forms of education financing, including private school vouchers that provide a fixed sum for parents to use in purchasing "bundled" services (tuition). When parents can shop for "unbundled" services – and can plow any savings back into other learning benefits for their child – students (and taxpayers) receive the greatest possible bang-for-buck in education.

Customized, affordable education is the great promise of Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts – and it's why the reach of these programs must ultimately extend to all K-12 students rather than just the special needs students who are (most appropriately) occupying Florida lawmakers' first attention.

## About the Author

*William Mattox is the director of The J. Stanley Marshall Center for Educational Options at The James Madison Institute in Tallahassee, Florida.*

## Key Takeaways

- Understandably, students with the most severe disabilities qualify for the highest per-pupil funds -- just as they would if they were enrolled in the public school classroom.
- One of the reasons PLSAs have generated so much enthusiasm is because [they] can be used to buy ‘unbundled’ educational services from multiple providers.
- When parents can shop for ‘unbundled’ services -- and can plow any savings back into other learning benefits for their child -- students (and taxpayers) receive the greatest possible bang-for-buck in education.
- To their credit, House Speaker Steve Crisafulli and Senate President Andy Gardiner have made PLSA expansion a major priority of the 2015 legislative session.
- Many ‘regular’ students would also benefit from the kind of flexibility PLSAs provide -- and these students should get more attention from Florida lawmakers in years to come.
- When parents can shop for ‘unbundled’ services -- and can plow any savings back into other learning benefits for their child -- students (and taxpayers) receive the greatest possible bang-for-buck in education.

## Memorable Quotes

“Like any parent, I want my son to have every opportunity to succeed in life. He faces more challenges than others when it comes to his educational path, and I want to do everything in my power to make sure he has a quality education, so he can fulfill the purpose for which he was created.” - *Lisa Hazelton*

“The PLSA is different from other state scholarships because it lets moms and dads direct funds toward any combination of programs that the parents think will provide the best path to their child’s educational success.” - *Julie Kleffel*



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