

3/1/2018 Summary by Hannah Heck

This year, the Georgia legislature considered several bills to improve the educational choices for students with individualized education plans (IEPs), one of which is awaiting passage in the senate. Representative Scot Turner's House Bill 759 would allow students who have previously qualified for the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship (GSNS) to be exempt from the prior year public school requirement.

## **Background**

The GSNS is a state-funded scholarship that gives parents an additional educational opportunity for their children. Now in its eleventh year, the GSNS (also known as the SB 10 waiver) has helped more than 4,000 students find an educational environment that best meets their unique needs.

A student earns a scholarship amount that is equal to the amount of state funds they would have earned under Georgia's QBE (Quality Basic Education) funding formula. The scholarships average \$5,656 per student but the exact amount depends on the child's diagnosis and services that the child received in the public school. These funds may be used only for tuition at a private school that is approved by the Georgia Department of Education (DOE) for participation in the program. More information about the GSNS can be obtained at the DOE website: <http://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/Policy/Pages/Special-Needs-Scholarship-Program.aspx>.

Currently, a student qualifies for the scholarship by attending public school for one year and obtaining an IEP during that year. Students must complete an *additional* year in public school if they have a gap in their usage of the scholarship.

## **Other Legislation**

Representative Scott Hilton sponsored House Bill 801 this legislative session to create additional flexibility in the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship (GSNS) and to remove barriers to enrollment that currently exist. This legislation received a House Education Subcommittee hearing but did not receive a vote.

In addition to the eligibility language in HB759, House Bill 801 would have also created additional flexibility by allowing the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship to not just cover tuition to private school, but also services, therapies and materials that may be necessary to best meet the needs of the student. The bill also would have allowed students adopted from foster care that are otherwise eligible for the scholarship an opportunity to waive the one-year public school requirement and allow a student's time in a Georgia public special education preschool to count towards the one-year requirement for scholarship eligibility.

## **Future Efforts and Opportunities to Engage**

Several legislators have expressed an interest in studying the GSNS program more comprehensively to evaluate the funding and flexibility that are needed in the program.

While the program has served many students well, the current law explicitly forbids scholarship dollars going to pay for certain therapies and services that students need in order to succeed. Parents report confusion as to how the scholarship is calculated and the average scholarship amount, \$5,656 per student, is well below the average tuition at the private schools that are approved to accept the scholarship. Additionally, the requirement that the student attend public school in Georgia for one year is also a difficult barrier for many families.

You can contact your legislator to express your support for the program and to encourage them to look at ways to make this option viable for more Georgia families. To stay connected with the effort, join the “Supporting Georgia's Special Needs Scholarship” group on Facebook.