

2020-21 State Scholarship Programs

Dear Parents and Guardians,

Here are a few things you may not know about scholarship programs. First, **Florida is the only state with seven scholarship programs.** Second, Florida leads the nation with the most students enrolled in scholarship programs. Finally, Florida students have a greater potential to achieve success as a result of these School Choice opportunities available to them. We know that many families are not aware of the different scholarships available for their children; therefore, we would like to take an opportunity to explain them in a brief summary to help you as you consider which is the best option for your child.

The Seven scholarships in Florida are the McKay Scholarship, Gardiner Scholarship, Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, Florida Empowerment Scholarship, Hope Scholarship, Opportunity Scholarship and a Reading scholarship. Each of these scholarships has different requirements for qualifying and this will be explained in brief within this article. It is important to know that **a family can only utilize one scholarship at a time.**

The purpose of this article is to outline the different scholarships, how a family would qualify and what might be some challenges if you move from one scholarship to another.

McKay Scholarship - The McKay Scholarship is for students who have been found eligible in the public school system. Eligibility requires that students who participate in this program must have an active IEP or a 504 plan. Students must also have attended the public school in the year prior to participating in this scholarship program. Students are eligible to use their McKay Scholarship at any private school that participates in the McKay Scholarship program and is compliant with the Department of Education.

Students on the McKay scholarship must attend a private school and satisfy all attendance requirements in order to be funded by the state. In addition, Florida State law allows for McKay students to take two virtual courses annually through Florida Virtual School. The State pays Florida Virtual School directly for these courses. **Students are not allowed to take courses at the District Virtual School as this is considered a return to public school which will cause a student to forfeit their McKay Scholarship.**

Students are eligible to participate in the McKay scholarship for as long as they're in school or until they turn 21 ½ years old. Students who leave the McKay scholarship and return to the public school are required to requalify for the McKay Scholarship. This could result in the student having to spend a minimum of one year in public school and potentially two years in order to regain their McKay Scholarship. Florida Law states that if a student returns to the public school, for even one day, it is considered a return to public school and will cause the student to forfeit their McKay Scholarship.

Gardiner Scholarship - The Gardiner Scholarship primarily serves students on the Autism Spectrum. There are list of other learning challenges and disabilities that also qualify for the scholarship.

For a complete list of the qualifying issues go online to <http://www.fldoe.org/schools/school-choice/>. This is the DOE website and it provides information about this scholarship as well as all of the other scholarships.

Students who utilize the Gardiner Scholarship are able to attend a private school of their choice assuming that private school is in compliance with the Florida Department of Education, or their parent can use the funds to provide other types of approved services such as tutoring, therapy, online learning, technology, and many other qualified items.

If a parent chooses online learning with a program similar to Florida Virtual School, the online learning service will invoice the Scholarship Funding Organization directly and the reimbursement will be deducted from the Gardiner amount issued during that school year. Parents should note that **if they use their Gardiner funds to pay for a service other than the private school their child attends there will be less funds available to pay for their child's private school education.** Also, Gardiner funds cannot be used for district schools or services not approved by the Scholarship Funding Organization. **Returning to public school forfeits your Gardiner scholarship.** However, you can regain the scholarship once you qualify and funds are available. Many parents who were attempting to participate in the Gardiner Scholarship are having to wait almost a year for funds to be available.

Florida Tax Credit Scholarship - The Florida Tax Credit Scholarship is available to families in Florida who are experiencing economic challenges. To qualify for this program families must meet a certain economic threshold. Parents must apply for this scholarship through one of the scholarship funding organizations recognized by the State of Florida. Parents can only use these funds at the private school where their child is enrolled; the funds will be sent to the school on a quarterly basis for the parent's endorsement to the school. Parents must endorse the quarterly payments in order for their child to continue enrollment at any school.

The funds for this program are not guaranteed as this program is funded through Tax Donations through major corporations and donors. Parents must report annual income to stay eligible for this program and they cannot exceed a certain threshold with their income in order to remain eligible. Certain income thresholds will either reduce the amount of the scholarship or disqualify a family to participate. More information about the income thresholds can be found at either of these two sites. (www.SUFS.org or www.AAAscholarship.org)

Students using the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, like students on the McKay scholarship, are eligible to take two FLVS online classes per year without it interrupting their scholarship funding. Students on this program are not required to have attended the public school the prior year. Students can utilize this program until they graduate from high school or are 21 ½ years old.

Family Empowerment Scholarship - The Family Empowerment Scholarship is similar to the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship. The financial requirements are the same and the eligibility requirements are the same. The difference with this program is that students must have been enrolled in a public school the year prior to participating in order to qualify in addition to meeting the income thresholds.

Students are eligible to use this scholarship until they are 21 ½. **Unlike the McKay Scholarship and the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship, students on the family empowerment scholarship are not allowed to take online courses.** Florida Law states that “an FES student may not take any state funded virtual school courses without jeopardizing scholarship eligibility”. If a student enrolls in state-funded virtual education such as Florida Virtual School or the District Virtual School or any other approved virtual school vendor in Florida they will jeopardize their FES scholarship.

Hope Scholarship - The Hope Scholarship is often referred to as the “bullying scholarship”. This scholarship is available to students who have had some type of experience of being bullied in the previous public school or some other type of student-related issue that has made it difficult for them to attend their public school on a daily basis. This scholarship is funded through tax proceeds collected from car sales in the state of Florida.

Florida Law states that a student enrolled in a Florida public school in kindergarten through grade 12 who has been subjected to an incident of battery; harassment; hazing; bullying; kidnapping; physical attack; robbery; sexual offenses, harassment, assault, or battery; threat or intimidation; or fighting at school has the opportunity to transfer to another public school with capacity or enroll in an approved private school under the Hope Scholarship. **A student’s Hope scholarship shall remain in force until the student returns to public school or graduates from high school, whichever occurs first.** If a student returns to public school, their Hope Scholarship will no longer be in effect.

Students utilizing the Hope Scholarship, like the McKay Scholarship students and the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship students, are also eligible to take two online FLVS virtual courses without jeopardizing their scholarship.

Opportunity Scholarship - This scholarship is now restricted to Public School students who attend a Failing public school. If a public school has been designated as earning a grade "F" or three consecutive "Ds" as based on the statewide assessments conducted pursuant to Section. 1008.22, Florida Statutes, then a student who attends that public school or is assigned to attend that public school can attend another high-performing public school and the district will provide transportation to the new school. This scholarship is not available to private school students.

Reading Scholarship - The Reading Scholarship Accounts are only available to students in grades 3 through 5 who are enrolled in a Florida public school and scored below a Level 3 on the grade 3 or grade 4 statewide, standardized English Language Arts assessment in the prior school year. This scholarship is also restricted to public school students; therefore, these funds are not available to private school students.

Please remember if you have any questions about your child’s scholarship please contact the school and we will be happy to answer any additional questions you may have. We hope this communication has been helpful as you try to determine the best school choice option for your child.