

John M. McKay Scholarships for Students with Disabilities

Dear Leaders,

During the 2001 Legislative Session the McKay Scholarship bill passed into law. While this bill does not impact the vast majority of home educators, there may be a small group of students who do qualify. You may know of parents who are considering home education out of frustration with the public schools who will qualify. It may also apply to some "600" schools who could possibly be contacted by parents about this. Therefore, I wanted to let you know about the McKay Scholarship.

I attended a meeting in Orlando on Wednesday, June 20, to discuss this bill and another scholarship program which passed this Session. I will send out two different emails about these programs in order to keep the details completely separate. These bills are very similar in some parts but are for different groups of students. The McKay Scholarship is for parents of special needs students who are dissatisfied with the services they are receiving in the public school. This bill gives the parent the opportunity to choose another public school or a private school simply by notifying the school district by one of the four dates in a school year. July 1, 2001 is the first deadline. You may read CS/CS/SB 1180 Enrolled at www.leg.state.fl.us You may also go to www.floridaschoolchoice.org or you may contact the DOE Choice office at 1-800-447-1636 if you have additional questions.

These are the basics of the new law, but if you are in a position to advise someone with a special needs child, you may want to refer them to the above sites for complete details.

To qualify the *student* must:

- (1) have been enrolled in a public school for the entire previous school year and reported by the school district for the October and February school count for funding;
- (2) have been accepted for admission for a private school that is eligible for the program; and
- (3) have notified the school district in writing at least 60 days prior to the date of the first scholarship payment. (The 60 days will not apply to the first deadline, because the bill was not signed before that date.)

A qualified *school* must:

- (1) Be a Florida private school;
- (2) Demonstrate fiscal soundness;
- (3) Notify the DOE of its intent to participate by May 1 of the school year in which it intends to participate. (The deadline for this first year is July 1.);
- (4) Comply with antidiscriminatory provisions of federal law for race, color and national origin;
- (5) Meet state and local health and safety laws and codes;
- (6) Be academically accountable to the parent for meeting the educational needs of the student;
- (7) Employ or contract with teachers who hold baccalaureate or high degrees, or have at least 3 years teaching experience in public or private schools, or have expertise that qualifies them to provide instruction in subjects taught;
- (8) Comply with all state laws relating to general regulations of private schools; or
- (9) Adhere to the tenets of its published disciplinary procedures prior to expulsion of a scholarship student.

Some school districts have allowed individual home education students to obtain special services for speech and language in the past. However, the state rules for the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA) are being re-written. I am planning to meet very soon with the DOE in regard to how these new rules will affect individual home educators. I have heard that the new rules will not permit individual home educated students to receive services at the school district.

I am also in contact with an attorney that devotes a large portion of his practice to representing special needs children and their families. He is following this issue and is in contact with HSLDA about a potential law suit which would standardize the inclusion of home education students in every school district. This is in the works, but there is nothing to report at this time. This is a new area for me and it is quite complicated. I have been trying to follow the legislation and rules during the past year to learn as much as I can about it. I believe that this is one of the areas of growth in the home school community and we must learn to represent the interest of parents of special needs children who want to home school them. I do not claim to be able to answer all the questions, but I am finding out who can.

The McKay Scholarship program may reduce the number of parents who want to home educate their special needs children, since it gives them choices that they have not had in the past.

FREE SERVICES TO CHILDREN:

Some information regarding services for children recently came to our attention. The Florida Elks Children's Therapy Services, Inc. (FECTS) offer physical and occupational therapy to families whose children need them without charge for up to 6 months. For information specific to your area of the state, call 800-523-1673.

Brenda Dickinson
President, Home Education Foundation