



Dr. John D. Barge, State School Superintendent  
"Making Education Work for All Georgians"

## Georgia Special Needs Scholarship Program Understanding the Program 2014 – 2015 School Year

The Georgia Special Needs Scholarship (GSNS) Program is a parental choice program for special needs students attending Georgia public schools who are served under an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The following provides information regarding eligibility and the different choice options available under the GSNS Program for the 2014 – 2015 school year. The GSNS web page <http://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/Policy/Pages/Special-Needs-Scholarship-Program.aspx> also has important information regarding the GSNS Program.

Parents of students continuing in the private school choice option for the 2014 – 2015 school year must read the *Continuing Participation* document posted on the web page for the requirements of continuing eligibility in the private school choice option.

### STEP 1- CONFIRM A STUDENT'S ELIGIBILITY

In order to qualify for the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship Program a student must meet the following requirements:

**Student Eligibility Criteria 1-** A student must have a parent/guardian who currently lives in Georgia and has been a resident for at least one calendar year.

**Student Eligibility Criteria 2-** A student was enrolled and completed the 2013 – 2014 school year in a Georgia public school in grades kindergarten through twelfth.

**Student Eligibility Criteria 3-** A student was reported attending a Georgia public school by a school district(s) during mandatory student counts conducted in October 2013 **and** March 2014.

**Student Eligibility Criteria 4 -** A student does not need to have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for the entire school year to qualify for the GSNS Program. A student must have received special education services at some point during the 2013 – 2014 school year through an IEP. A student must be reported by a school district(s) in either the October 2013 **OR** March 2014 student counts **OR** in final student record as a student receiving special education services by the end of the 2013 – 2014 school year.

At the end of the school year, school systems update student records for students served by an IEP after the March FTE submissions to reflect that they are special education students. In mid-July the database for the scholarship calculator is updated to include these students.

The table on the next two pages will assist a parent/guardian verify a student's eligibility for the 2014 - 2015 school year.



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| <b>October 2013<br/>Student Count</b>   | <b>March 2014<br/>Student Count</b>   | <b>Final Student Record</b>  | <b>Student Eligible for<br/>14-15 School Year?</b> |
|---|---|--|--|
| Student counted<br><b>YES</b><br><br>Student reported as special<br>education student?<br><b>YES</b>  | Student counted<br><b>YES</b><br><br>Student reported as special<br>education student?<br><b>YES</b>  | Student reported as<br>Special Education<br>Student?<br><b>YES</b> | <b>YES</b>   |
| Student counted.<br><b>Yes</b><br><br>Student reported as special<br>education student?<br><b>NO</b>  | Student counted.<br><b>Yes</b><br><br>Student reported as special<br>education student?<br><b>YES</b> | Student reported as<br>special education<br>student?<br><b>YES</b> | <b>YES</b>   |
| Student counted.<br><b>Yes</b><br><br>Student reported as special<br>education student?<br><b>YES</b> | Student counted.<br><b>Yes</b><br><br>Student reported as special<br>education student?<br><b>NO</b>  | Student reported as<br>special education<br>student?<br><b>NO</b>  | <b>YES</b>   |
| Student counted.<br><b>YES</b><br><br>Student reported as special<br>education student?<br><b>NO</b>  | Student counted.<br><b>YES</b><br><br>Student reported as special<br>education student?<br><b>NO</b>  | Student reported as<br>special education<br>student?<br><b>YES</b> | <b>YES</b>   |



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| <b>October 2013<br/>Student Count</b>   | <b>March 2014<br/>Student Count</b>   | <b>Final Student Record</b>  | <b>Student Eligible for<br/>14-15 School Year?</b> |
|---|---|--|--|
| Student counted.<br><b>YES</b><br><br>Student reported as special<br>education student?<br><b>NO</b>  | Student counted.<br><b>YES</b><br><br>Student reported as special<br>education student?<br><b>NO</b>  | Student reported as<br>special education<br>student?<br><b>NO</b>  | <b>NO</b>  |
| Student counted.<br><b>NO</b><br><br>Student reported as special<br>education student?<br><b>NO</b>   | Student counted.<br><b>YES</b><br><br>Student reported as special<br>education student?<br><b>YES</b> | Student reported as<br>special education<br>student?<br><b>YES</b> | <b>NO</b>  |
| Student counted.<br><b>YES</b><br><br>Student reported as special<br>education student?<br><b>YES</b> | Student counted.<br><b>NO</b><br><br>Student reported as special<br>education student?<br><b>NO</b>   | Student reported as<br>special education<br>student?<br><b>YES</b> | <b>NO</b>  |

For students that do not meet these eligibility requirements, a parent can complete an application to *Request Waiver of Prior School Year Attendance Requirements for Medical Reasons*. The waiver request must include documentation that specifies **the medical need(s)** of the student and how that need rises to the level of hardship or disability to waive the prior year requirement in the statute. This application form is available on the GSNS web page. Parents must send this application to the GaDOE following the instructions provided.



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**The following students are ineligible for the GSNS program:**

- Pre-school special education students. A special education student must complete a full school year in kindergarten before he/she can be eligible.
- Home school students.
- Students privately placed in residential treatment facilities.
- Students attending a Department of Juvenile Justice School.
- Students in the Early Intervention Program (EIP).
- Students with an Individualized Accommodation Plan (IAP, Section 504 plan); and/or
- Students otherwise not eligible per Official Code of Georgia Annotated Section §20-2-2114.

**STEP 2- IF A STUDENT IS ELIGIBLE, DECIDE WHICH CHOICE OPTION TO USE**

If a student meets the eligibility criteria for the GSNS Program; parents/guardians have the right to request a transfer from a student's current public school to:

- Another public school within their school system (see page 5); or
- Another public school outside their school system (see page 5); or
- One of the three state schools for the blind or deaf (see page 6); or
- A private school authorized to participate in the GSNS Program (see pages 7-9).

**Note:** Transportation under all school choice options are the responsibility of a parent/guardian. Funds received through the GSNS Program can only be used to offset tuition and fees at a private school authorized by the State Board of Education to participate in the program. Funds cannot be used to offset the costs of out of district tuition, charter schools, or other options available under public school choice.



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### PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE OPTION

If a student meets the eligibility criteria, a parent/guardian has the right to request a public school transfer from a student's current public school to:

- Another public school within their school system or
- Another public school system outside their school system.

**If a student attended a private school through the Special Needs Scholarship Program during the 2013 - 2014 school year, a parent/guardian is eligible for public school choice options for the 2014 – 2015 school year.**

**The authority to allow or deny transfer requests belongs to a school system NOT the Georgia Department of Education.** Parents/guardians must contact a school system directly regarding the process the school system uses for public school transfer requests available through the GSNS Program. School systems can create their own forms and set deadlines for transfer requests. A parent can link to any school system from the Georgia Department of Education's home page at [www.gadoe.org](http://www.gadoe.org), look for the school finder icon on the home page.



If a transfer request is granted by a school system, the student must be allowed to complete all grades at a school. For example, if a student is granted a transfer request to a middle school that serves grades 6 - 8, the transfer request would apply to the student's attendance through grade 8. The parent would need to file another transfer request if the parent wished to send the student to a different high school.

### **TRANSFERS WITHIN A SCHOOL SYSTEM (e.g. transfer from one public school in a county to another in the same county)**

A school system reviewing a transfer request must evaluate the request based on availability of space and/or the availability of a special education program at the requested public school that can meet the services outlined in a student's IEP. If there is no space available and/or if the public school requested by a parent/guardian cannot provide the special education services outlined in a student's IEP, then the school system can deny the transfer request.

### **TRANSFERS OUTSIDE OF A SCHOOL SYSTEM (e.g. transfer from a public school in Cobb County to a public school in Cherokee County)**

A school system reviewing a transfer request to its school system from another school system can deny a request for any reason even if there is space and the availability of a special education program at a requested public school. **Note:** It is allowable for a school system to have a policy not to accept students that reside out of the school system.



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If a school system approves an out of system transfer request, it can charge a parent/guardian for the costs of educating a student; also known as out of district tuition. **Note:** Funds received through the GSNS Program cannot be used to offset the costs of out of district tuition.

**PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE OPTION- STATE SCHOOL OPTION FOR STATE SCHOOLS**

Students eligible to participate in the GSNS Program may request a transfer to a State School (Atlanta Area School for the Deaf, Georgia Academy for the Blind or the Georgia School for the Deaf) if such placement is consistent with the student's IEP. **Only students with the primary exceptionality of visual and/or individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing may request a transfer to a State School.**

A parent/guardian wishing to use the State School Option must notify their school system using the transfer request form made available by GaDOE. A parent/guardian must return the form directly to a school system. A parent/guardian may find it helpful to contact the school system in determining to whom the form should be sent. The Director of State Schools at the GaDOE or other designee will contact a parent/guardian requesting the State School Option to schedule an IEP team meeting to discuss whether the placement at the State School is appropriate. If the State School Option request is granted, the parent is responsible for providing all transportation to and from the school.



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### PRIVATE SCHOOL CHOICE OPTION

There are no application or income restrictions for eligibility in the GSNS Program. Eligibility is only based on requirements outlined on page 1. Scholarships generally range from \$2,500 - \$13,500. The average scholarship amount is \$5,700.

Many parents/guardians are surprised to learn that a private school participating in the GSNS Program is not required to follow a student's IEP and is not required to provide special education services to a student. This stems from the law governing the GSNS Program, the Official Code of Georgia Annotated Section §20-2-2114(f), states **Acceptance of scholarship shall have the same effect as a parental refusal to consent to services pursuant to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C.A. Section 1400, et seq.** This means that a parent/guardian's acceptance of a scholarship is the same as refusal to provide parental consent for special services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and a participating private school is neither required to follow a student's IEP nor is it required to provide special education services to a student. A parent/guardian must ask a private school directly regarding the specific special education or other services it may be able to provide for students.

There is no application for the GSNS program since eligibility is based on information already reported by public schools to the GaDOE. A scholarship calculator is available on the web page for parents/guardians to verify a child's eligibility and to see an eligible student's award amount. The calculator is updated each May with award amounts for the upcoming school. Read *Using the Calculator* posted on the GSNS webpage for further instructions.

**IMPORTANT:** The scholarship calculator will only work if a student is eligible for the GSNS Program. The award sheet (see sample below) generated by the scholarship calculator is the only proof needed of a student's eligibility for the GSNS Program. It shows the annual amount that a student will receive divided over the course of four payments made during a school year. See the last page of this document for an explanation of the state's funding formula for K – 12 education which is the formula used to determine scholarship amounts.

### ENROLLING A STUDENT IN A PRIVATE SCHOOL

Parents have three opportunities during a school year to transfer an eligible student from a public school to an authorized private school by the following dates for the 2014 – 2015 school year:

1. September 15, 2014- **NO FILING OF INTENT FORM REQUIRED.**
2. December 15, 2014- **Filing of intent form required. See instructions below.**
3. March 4, 2015- - **Filing of intent form required. See instructions below.**



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For ONLY the December and March dates parents must complete an *Intent to File* form which will be posted on the web page in October 2014. Scholarship payments are prorated for students enrolling by December 15 (1/2 of scholarship amount printed on the award sheet paid) or March 4 (1/4 of scholarship amount printed on the award sheet paid) for the 2014 - 2015 school year.

**The multiple enrollment dates only apply for students that completed the 2013 - 2014 school year in a Georgia public school. It DOES NOT apply to students that used the private school choice option during the 2013- 2014 school year. Read the *Continuing Participation* document posted on the web page for the requirements of continuing eligibility in the private school choice option.**

A parent/guardian must print the award sheet from the calculator and make copies of it. A copy must be given to a private school authorized by the State Board of Education to participate in the GSNS Program. The list of authorized private schools is posted on the GSNS webpage.

**Sample Award Sheet**

Participation in the GSNS Program is voluntary on the part of private schools and is open to all private schools. If there is a school a parent/guardian is interested in that is not on the current authorized private school list, the parent/guardian is encouraged to ask the school to apply. The application with instructions and eligibility requirements for private schools for the 2014 - 2015 school year is available on the GSNS webpage.



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**If an authorized private school grants admission to a student, a parent/guardian must provide a copy of the student's scholarship award sheet to the private school.** Authorized private schools have access to an electronic system which they use to report eligible students enrolled at their schools to the GaDOE. Each school year private schools report enrolled students, so the GaDOE knows which students are participating in the private school choice option and where they are enrolled. Without notification of a student's eligibility, the private school will not report the student as enrolled in the GSNS Program to the GaDOE. This will affect the scholarship payments for a student and could affect his/her eligibility for the GSNS Program.

**IMPORTANT:** A parent/guardian must obtain written copies of any contracts/agreements entered with a private school (e.g. tuition reimbursement, fee schedules). The tuition and fees documents should clearly explain how the private school charges for tuition and fees and how payments are accepted. Tuition information must also explain how the private school handles the processing of tuition for GSNS students.

Upon acceptance of the scholarship, a parent/guardian assumes full financial responsibility for the education of the scholarship student, including transportation to and from the participating school. A parent/guardian must comply with all the private school's policies. Once accepted into a private school a parent/guardian must withdraw a student from the public school at the beginning of the new school year following the procedures of the public school. A student cannot be dually enrolled at a public and private school and receive a scholarship.

At any point during the school year, a parent/guardian can transfer a GSNS student to another private school authorized to participate in the GSNS Program. Refer to the *Transfer Information* document posted on the web page for more information regarding transferring a student.

### **MAINTAINING ELIGIBILITY IN THE PRIVATE SCHOOL CHOICE OPTION**

**Important:** A student must complete the 2014 - 2015 school year at an authorized private school to continue in the private school choice option for the 2015 - 2016 school year. **Due to funding, a student that attends an authorized private school for the 2014 - 2015 school year, but does not complete the year at an authorized private school is ineligible to participate in the GSNS Program for the 2015 – 2016 school year.** The only way a student can re-qualify for the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship Program is to again meet the program requirements outlined in law (see page 1).



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A student may continue to participate in the GSNS Program as long as:

- ✓ Student remains a resident of Georgia; and
- ✓ Student's parent/guardian remain residents of Georgia; and
- ✓ Student has continual enrollment and attendance in a private school participating in the GSNS Program; and
- ✓ Parent/guardian complies with GSNS Program law and rule.

An IEP does not need to be kept current to continue a student's participation in the GSNS Program.

Promotion or retention of a student does not affect eligibility for the GSNS Program.

### **GSNS SCHOLARSHIP FUNDING FORMULA**

The Georgia Special Needs Scholarship amount is based on information reported by each school system during the previous year's October Full-Time Enrollment (FTE) count. That would be October 2013 for the 2014 - 2015 school year funding. State funding for students with disabilities can vary greatly and is determined by the services the school district reported as providing to the student during the prior school year's data collection cycle for six segments. Scholarship payments for continuing GSNS students are calculated using the data from the last year a student was in a Georgia public school. The data is entered into the State public education funding formula that applies to the upcoming school year.

This is the maximum amount the Georgia Department of Education can give out for a student's scholarship. The scholarship is made up of only state funds. Not all special education services provided by a public school for a student are paid for with state funds. By law, federal and local funds are not included in the scholarship.

**Important note for parent(s)/guardian(s) whose child's IEP was put into place after October 2013:** The funds accessed for scholarships are the state funding a public school earned for a student during the previous October. For students with later IEPs the local school district will only earn the base level of state funding for a student (approx. \$2,500 - \$3,000). Therefore, a parent/guardian has two choices for the upcoming school year. First, a parent/guardian can choose to take the funds a child is eligible for and enroll him/her in a participating private school. Because private schools do not report data, a child's scholarship amount would be based on that last year he/she was in public school. Second, a parent/guardian can decide to have a child attend a public school for the entire 2014 - 2015 school year. State funding for the 2015 – 2016 school year should increase since it will be based on the IEP in October 2014. A student qualifies for the 2015 - 2016 school year if a student is enrolled and reported by a public school system or school systems for funding purposes during the **October 2014 and March 2015** full-time equivalent (FTE) program counts during the 2014 - 2015 school year. In addition, the student must be reported as a special needs student served by an active IEP through the FTE reporting system.



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Below is a numerical example for two different students:

| Segments for 2013 - 2014 School Year    | Per Segment (class) amount | Student #1                 |              | Student #2                 |              |
|---|----------------------------|----------------------------|--------------|----------------------------|--------------|
|   |                            | Per Segment (class) amount | Earnings     | Per Segment (class) amount | Earnings     |
| Kindergarten                            | 548                        |                            | 0            |                            | 0            |
| Kindergarten EIP                        | 676                        |                            | 0            |                            | 0            |
| Grades 1-3                              | 427                        |                            | 0            | 2                          | 854          |
| Grades 1-3 EIP                          | 596                        |                            | 0            |                            | 0            |
| Grades 4-5                              | 344                        |                            | 0            |                            | 0            |
| Grades 4-5 EIP                          | 594                        |                            | 0            |                            | 0            |
| Grades 6-8 Middle Grades                | 341                        |                            | 0            |                            | 0            |
| Grades 6-8 Middle School                |                            |                            |              |                            |              |
| Incentive                               | 376                        | 4                          | 1,503        |                            | 0            |
| Grades 9-12                             | 332                        |                            | 0            |                            | 0            |
| Vocational Labs                         | 396                        |                            | 0            |                            | 0            |
| Special Education I                     | 791                        |                            | 0            |                            | 0            |
| Special Education II                    | 926                        |                            | 0            | 2                          | 1,852        |
| Special Education III                   | 1,179                      |                            | 0            |                            | 0            |
| Special Education IV                    | 1,910                      | 2                          | 3,821        | 2                          | 3,821        |
| Special Education V                     | 814                        |                            | 0            |                            | 0            |
| Gifted                                  | 551                        |                            | 0            |                            | 0            |
| Remedial                                | 435                        |                            | 0            |                            | 0            |
| Alternative Program                     | 489                        |                            | 0            |                            | 0            |
| Eng. to Speakers of other Langs. (ESOL) | 832                        |                            | 0            |                            | 0            |
| SED                                     | 1,719                      |                            |              |                            |              |
|   |                            | <b>Total of 6 Segments</b> | <b>5,323</b> | <b>Total of 6 Segments</b> | <b>6,527</b> |

Under the GSNS Program, if tuition and fees charged by a private school are higher than the scholarship award, a parent/guardian is responsible for paying the additional tuition. Most private schools participating in the GSNS Program charge tuition and fees that are more than the amount of a student’s scholarship. GSNS funds cannot be used to pay for the following:

- × **Transportation**
- × **Before or after school care**
- × **Meals**
- × **Tutoring**
- × **Field trip fees**
- × **Athletic fees**
- × **School supplies**
- × **Summer school/camp programs**
- × **Other fees as determined by the GaDOE**