

IMPORTANT: This document is for parent(s)/guardian(s) who are interested in having a child participate for the **first time** in the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship Program (GSNS) for the 2009 - 2010 school year. If parent(s)/guardian(s)' child participated in the program during the 2008 - 2009 school year, refer to the *2009 – 2010 Re-Enrollment Instructions* document on the GSNS website.

This is an attempt to summarize important requirements related to the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship Program. This page is only a guide. The provisions written in GSNS law and rule take precedence.

The Georgia Special Needs Scholarship Program is a parental choice program for Georgia public school special needs students served under an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Students in the Early Intervention Program (EIP) or that have an Individualized Accommodation Plan (IAP) do not qualify for the program under law for the GSNS program.

Schools (private and public) and school districts are not responsible for providing information regarding the GSNS program. They are not responsible for administering the program. Parent(s)/guardian(s) interested in the GSNS program must first visit the GSNS website at <http://public.doe.k12.ga.us/sb10.aspx>.

Steps for determining student eligibility for a Georgia Special Needs Scholarship in 2009-2010

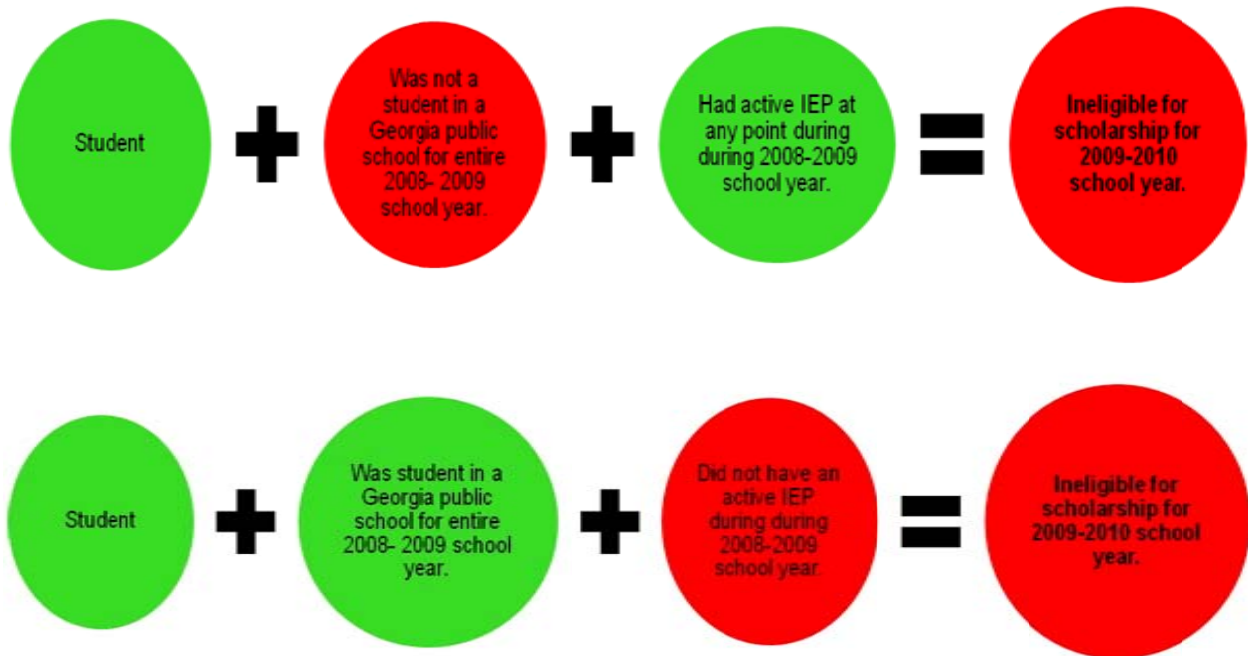
If your child participated in the program during the 2008-2009 school year refer to the *2009–2010 Re-Enrollment Instructions* document in the For Parents box on the website.

The following applies if you are interested in the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship Program for the 2009-2010 school year for the first time:

Verify your child’s eligibility for the 2009-2010 school year by reviewing diagram below. Note IEP stands for Individualized Education Program.



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

- The student’s parent currently resides within Georgia and has been a Georgia resident for at least one calendar year; and
- The student has spent the prior school year (2008-2009) in attendance at a Georgia public school in grades K-12 and was in attendance on both the October 2008 and March 2009 FTE counts; and
- The student had and was served under an IEP written by the public school in accordance with federal and state laws and regulations **at any point** during the 2008-2009 school year.

There are no exceptions to the eligibility criteria.

Learn and understand about the GSNS program:

1. The GSNS website <http://public.doe.k12.ga.us/sb10.aspx> contains all information regarding the GSNS program. It is recommend that parent(s)/guardian(s) bookmark it and check it often since it is updated continuously.
2. Parent(s)/guardian(s) are responsible for knowing and meeting all deadlines associated with the GSNS program.

Public School Choice Option

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

- Another public school within their district of residence; or
- Another public school system outside their district of residence; or
- To one of the three state schools for the blind or deaf.

Intra-District Transfers (within school system)

A school system considering a transfer request between schools in its system may deny a parental request for transfer based on lack of capacity and/or the lack of a program available at another school which is aligned with the student's IEP. Capacity is defined in two ways:

- Capacity of the school building based on established health and safety provisions; and
- Class-size capacity by grade and subject, based on state law and rule.

Inter-District Transfers (out of system)

A school system considering a request for a transfer to its school system from another school system **can deny a request** even if there is capacity and a program available that is aligned to the student's IEP. If a school district approves the transfer request, it can charge parent(s)/guardian(s) for the costs of educating a student during the first school year of the transfer.

Parent(s)/guardian(s) who wish to use the public school choice transfer option must complete the transfer request form on the GSNS website. The form must be sent to the school district directly.

Parent(s)/guardian(s) should contact school district to find out to whom the form should be sent and any deadlines involved in making the request.

Private School Choice Option

1. There is no formal application process for the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship Program.
2. Parent(s)/guardian(s) will determine a child's potential scholarship award using the scholarship calculator on the website. **The calculator for the 2009-2010 school year will be available in May 2009.**

3. Parent(s)/guardian(s) will need the following information to determine a child's potential scholarship award:
 - ✓ School system and school name that child attended in October 2008. Be aware that the school a child attends may not be where the school system officially reported a child for attendance. If parent(s)/guardian(s) is unsure, contact the local school system.
 - ✓ Child's last name, first initial (last name should be entered as documented on the child's most recent IEP).
 - ✓ Child's date of birth (as written on the child's most recent IEP document).
4. If the system finds a match, a potential scholarship award will generate. **This is proof of the child's eligibility for the program.** Parent(s)/guardian(s) must print the award sheet and make copies of it. Parent(s)/guardian(s) must always keep a copy for his/her records since it is proof of a child's eligibility. Parent(s)/guardian(s) will not be able to go to the website in subsequent years to reprint it.
5. Once parent(s)/guardian(s) has a scholarship award sheet, he/she can begin considering authorized private schools. The scholarship can only be used at a private school authorized to participate in the program.
6. Parent(s)/guardian(s) must provide a copy of the scholarship award sheet to a private school when applying. This notifies the private school that a student is eligible for the scholarship. If parent(s)/guardian(s) fails to notify a private school of a student's eligibility, the private school will not report that student as enrolled in GSNS program to the Georgia Department of Education. The student will not receive a scholarship payment for the school year and lose his/her eligibility for the program.
7. Parent(s)/guardian(s) must complete and submit the *Parent Intent Form* on the website only if a child is eligible and has a potential scholarship award.
8. ***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 accepting a scholarship waives a parent/guardian's rights under IDEA and a participating private school is not required to follow a student's IEP.***

Parent/guardian is responsible for enrolling a child in an authorized private school

1. The initial list of authorized private schools for the 2009 – 2010 school year will be posted on the GSNS website and updated monthly through July 2009.
2. Parents can begin learning about authorized private schools by reviewing applications posted on the GSNS website.

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3. Once parent(s)/guardian(s) have verified a child's eligibility, he/she can begin applying to any of the authorized private schools. Parent(s)/guardian(s) will need to contact each school directly to learn about its application process.
4. A private school participating in the GSNS program is not required to alter any of its business practices under the program. Parent(s)/guardian(s) must comply with the private school's policies. GaDOE staff **cannot** resolve disputes that may arise between parent(s)/guardian(s) and the private school.
5. Parent(s)/guardian(s) must read and understand any contracts/agreements entered into with a private school. Parent(s)/guardian(s) must obtain written copies of any contracts/agreements entered with the school (e.g. tuition reimbursement, fee schedules). Parent(s)/guardian(s) must keep track of any payments made to a private school. GaDOE staff **cannot** resolve any disputes that may arise between a parent/guardian and a private school.
6. Scholarship funds received through the program are only intended to offset the tuition and fees at a private school. The amount of the scholarship is equal to the amount of state funds the public school system received for the special education student during the prior school year; or the amount of the private school's tuition and fees, **whichever is less**. Funds not used remain in the State treasury.
7. Upon acceptance of the scholarship, the parent(s)/guardian(s) assumes full financial responsibility for the education of the scholarship student, including transportation to and from the participating school.
8. When applying, a parent/guardian must notify a private school a child is a potential GSNS student. **Parent(s)/guardian(s) are required** to provide the private school with a copy of the potential scholarship award sheet for a child. One parent/guardian must also provide his/her social security number to the private school in order to process a child's scholarship payment. The parent/guardian providing this information will be required to sign the scholarship checks when they are received by the school. Failure to comply with these requirements will result in ineligibility to participate in the GSNS program.
9. Once accepted into a private school a parent must withdraw their child 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.
10. Follow up with a selected private school to ensure they have enrolled and reported a child as a GSNS student to the GSNS office. If a school fails to report a GSNS student, scholarship payments for the student will not be issued and the student will lose his/her eligibility.
11. **In order to be eligible to receive the scholarship for the 2009 – 2010 school year, a student must be in attendance in an authorized private school by September 11, 2009 no exceptions.** This date is subject to change.

Understanding GSNS program requirements

1. Scholarship amounts vary by student based on four criteria Georgia uses to determine state funding for all special education students:
 - Disability type
 - Severity of disability as rated by the IEP team
 - Segments (hours) served per day for disability
 - Level of service for the segments served

Consequently, two students with the same disability can be funded very differently.

2. If tuition is higher at a school than the scholarship award, the parent/guardian is responsible for paying the additional tuition. If tuition is less than the scholarship award, the lesser amount will be paid under the scholarship. The GSNS program by law will always pay the **lesser** of the two amounts.
3. By law, scholarship checks are issued four times a year. Payment is for instruction and services already received. For example, the October first quarter payment is for services received in August and September.
4. A student must be enrolled and attending an authorized private school for 35 school days during a payment cycle to be eligible to receive payment for that cycle. The State can only legally make scholarship payments to parents on a quarterly basis. If a student withdraws from a private school prior to the 35 days and does not transfer to another authorized private school, no scholarship payment would be issued. A private school can collect amounts owed directly from parent(s)/guardian(s).
5. Checks are made out to parent(s)/guardian(s) of record at the private school, but are mailed directly to a private school. The private school is required to notify all parent(s)/guardian(s) when it receives scholarship payments. By law, parent(s)/guardian(s) are required to endorse scholarship checks over to a private school using a restrictive endorsement within 30 days of the notice from the private school. A parent/guardian cannot take a scholarship check from a school nor can he/she refuse to endorse a check; both will result in forfeiture of scholarship. It is illegal for private schools to endorse scholarship checks for parents.

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6. The GSNS Program is authorized to make one payment per student per quarter and is not authorized to make any partial or retroactive payments. Upon endorsing a check to the private school, the parent/guardian and the private school validate that the quarterly payment amount is correct. Any discrepancies thereafter shall be resolved between the parent/guardian and the private school.
7. The IRS has determined that acceptance of a scholarship under this program is not considered personal family income as long as a parent/guardian does not attempt to deposit it or cash the check against an account.
8. A private school participating in the GSNS program is not required to alter any of its business practices or school policies under the program. Therefore, parent(s)/guardian(s) are responsible for complying with the private school's business practices and a student must comply with the private school's policies.
9. Parent(s)/guardian(s) must read and understand any contracts/agreements entered into with a private school. Parent(s)/guardian(s) must obtain written copies of any contracts/agreements entered with the school (e.g. tuition reimbursement, fee schedules). Parent(s)/guardian(s) must keep track of any payments made to a private school. GaDOE staff **cannot** resolve any disputes that may arise between a parent/guardian and a private school.
10. Keep a student in attendance at a participating private school throughout the school year unless excused by the school for illness or other good cause.
11. If at any point during the school year, parent(s)/guardian(s) is dissatisfied with a private school he/she can transfer a student to another authorized private school on the GSNS list. Parent(s)/guardian(s) should not remove a student from his/her current private school until parent(s)/guardian(s) has received acceptance from another private school on the list.
12. If parent(s)/guardian(s) transfers a student back into public school, the scholarship for a student will end. A student will need to attend a public school for one full school year and retain his/her IEP to regain eligibility.
13. GSNS funds **cannot** be used to pay for student transportation. Parent(s)/guardian(s) must provide and pay for transportation a student to attend an authorized private school unless the school provides daily transportation for students. This also applies, if parent(s)/guardian(s) would like for a student to participate in statewide assessments.

14. GSNS funds **cannot** be used to pay for the following:

- **Before or after school care**
- **Meals**
- **Tutoring**
- **Transportation**
- **Fees associated with field trips**
- **Athletic fees**
- **School supplies**

15. Any complaints regarding a GSNS authorized private school must be submitted using the official GSNS complaint form. The form must be notarized and mailed to the GSNS office. Complaints will not be taken over the telephone.