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Metro

Swift growth in vouchers predicted

By LAURA DIAMOND
 ldiamond@ajc.com

When Georgia started its voucher program for special education students last year, state education officials and lawmakers were unsure how many students and private schools would participate.

They called it a success when 899 children with disabilities received vouchers to leave their public schools and attend 117 participating private schools. They expect even better results this year.

At least 125 private schools are expected to accept vouchers this coming school year, said Pam Smith, who oversees the program for the Georgia Department of Education. The state changed its application process and required all of last year's participating private schools to apply again, along with any new schools.

The state Board of Education has approved 96 schools and will vote on 29 more Thursday. An additional 10 to 15 schools may be approved in August, Smith said.

Parents have until Sept. 5 to enroll in a participating private school. State leaders say more families are expected to take part this year.



FRANK NIEMEIR / fniemeir@ajc.com

Lou Manzella (left) and **Steven Hicks** of Center Academy talk in a classroom at the Smyrna school. It's opening to meet demand for private special education under a voucher program.

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Vouchers: Schools opening

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"I think we'll see a doubling, if not this year then very soon," said state Senate President Pro-Tem Eric Johnson (R-Savannah).

Johnson led the push for the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship program, which state lawmakers narrowly passed in 2007.

The program uses taxpayer money to provide vouchers so special education students who attend public schools can go to private schools instead. Modeled after a similar voucher program in Florida, it is designed to give families more schooling options.

Johnson said last week that he expects more private schools to open and existing campuses to expand to meet demand.

Some of the new schools may come from out of state, like the Center Academy opening in Smyrna.

The Florida-based company runs 13 private schools for students with disabilities and is opening its first school in Georgia. The company plans to open six more schools in metro Atlanta the next five to 10 years, said Steven Hicks, vice president of operations.

Hicks and others say Center Academy is the first private school to come to Georgia because of the voucher program.

"I assume others will follow," Hicks said. "There is a demand for more private schools."

The schools must meet several criteria to participate, including proof of financial stability and being accredited

What is special education?

Programs to serve children with mental, physical, emotional and behavioral disabilities.

What is the Georgia Special Needs Scholarship?

A program to use taxpayer money to pay for vouchers so special education students who attend public schools can go to private schools instead.

How do I apply?

Application forms, a list of participating school and other information about eligibility can be found at www.doe.k12.ga.us/pea_policy.aspx. Click on the "Georgia Special Needs Scholarship" link under the Scholarships category.

or in the process of accreditation.

Many of the students who receive vouchers wouldn't be able to attend private schools without the program, Smith said. About one-third of last year's voucher recipients came from low-income homes, according to a state report.

Each voucher is a different amount based on what the state paid for services at the child's public school. Last year's average was \$6,273, and vouchers ranged from \$2,356 to \$15,324, according to the state.

Kelly Long received a voucher for her son, Grant,

VOUCHER RECIPIENTS

Most of the 899 students who used vouchers last school year come from metro Atlanta school districts. Here's a breakdown:

District	Number of scholarship students
Atlanta	39
Cherokee County	31
Clayton County	57
Cobb County	98
Coweta County	12
Decatur	3
DeKalb County	111
Fayette County	46
Fulton County	122
Gwinnett County	88
Henry County	33
Marietta	1

Source: Georgia Department of Education

who has Asperger syndrome, a neurological disorder. The 10-year-old attended Porter Academy in Roswell and will return in August.

The voucher covers about one-quarter of the nearly \$17,500 tuition at the school, Long said. The family, which also has a son in college, took out loans to pay for the rest.

"A lot of parents are so stuck and don't know how they can afford private school," Long said. "There are so many other costs that pile up between doctors' bills and therapy costs. But this gave us courage. It got us started on ways to afford private school."