

# MDE awards 268 special needs scholarships

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**TUPELO** — State funding is still available for Mississippi students with special needs seeking private education.

So far, the state Department of Education has provided 268 scholarships totaling nearly \$200,000 to public school students with special needs, mostly in the Jackson area, who wish to move to private school.

The money is awarded through the MDE's Education Scholarship Accounts.

The ESA was created through the 2015 Equal Opportunity for Students with Special Needs Act, a law designed to provide an opportunity for parents who wish to withdraw their child with

special needs from the public school system and use scholarship money to send them to private school.

The Legislature passed the controversial legislation during the 2015 session to create a five-year pilot program.

The plan was for 500 students to be given vouchers in the first year and an additional 500 students each year for four more years, totaling \$16.3 million in state funds over five years.

A maximum of 433 \$6,500 scholarships will be made available to Mississippi residents for the 2015-16 school year.

Sen. Nancy Collins, R-Tupelo, was the primary author of the legislation. Collins, who lost her seat in recent elections earlier this year, said at the time the bill

was passed she felt public schools were not meeting the needs of special education students.

Supporters of the law argued that it would provide parents more choices for additional support and education for their children with special needs.

"Special-needs students deserve the opportunity to succeed, and this bill gives parents the power to provide additional resources to help their children obtain the education and support they need," Gov. Phil Bryant said when the Legislature passed the bill.

Those opposed to the law said public money should not support private schools and rather should be put toward special education programs in public schools.

Additionally, many in

opposition to the law argued that it would only help a small fraction of the state's special needs students, while investing in the public school system, where most children attend, would impact a larger number of students with special needs.

There are more than 65,000 students in the state classified as having special needs.

The MDE began taking applications in July, and the agency will continue to accept and approve applications that meet criteria as long as funds are available.

Applicants must be Mississippi residents and must have had an Individualized Education Plan, which are provided by public schools, within the last 18 months.