



THE FLORIDA SENATE
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President

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Senate Unanimously Passes Comprehensive Autism Support Legislation, New Opportunities for Floridians with Autism and their Families
Legislation by Senator Harrell promotes early detection, specialized education programs

Tallahassee—The Florida Senate today unanimously passed Senate Bill (SB) 112, Children with Developmental Disabilities, by Senator Gayle Harrell (R-Stuart). The legislation increases opportunities for early detection, intervention, and support for children with autism and their families. The legislation also creates a coordinated state approach to research, training and public awareness of autism spectrum disorder by designating the Center for Autism and Neurodevelopment at the University of Florida as a statewide hub for autism research, services, and best practices.

“As more and more families across our state are facing a diagnosis of Autism, this bill offers new support from all angles, coordinating research and training, expanding early detection, and increasing education opportunities and other treatment services,” said Senate President Ben Albritton (R-Wauchula), who has committed to prioritizing support for Floridians with Autism during his two-year term as Senate President. “As always, parents are in control and equipped to make the best decisions to help children reach their full potential.”

“Research is clear. Early detection and intervention services promote positive outcomes for infants, toddlers, and children with a disability or developmental delay. I’m so pleased to see the Senate pass this good bill to give parents the opportunity to continue critical early intervention services provided through the Early Steps Program until their child turns four and begins receiving services provided through the school district,” said Senator Harrell. “Currently, there are about 66,000 students with Autism in our public school system. Specific training for our instructional personnel will help these students develop key reading, language, and math skills. Additionally, by developing summer programs designed specifically for children with Autism, we can help parents find summer camps and other activities that can accommodate the specific needs of a child with autism, ensuring year-round continuity of care.”

Expands Free Screening and Early Detection Opportunities

The bill expands the Dr. and Mrs. Alfonse and Kathleen Cinotti Health Care Screening and Services Grant Program to include free screenings, referrals, and related services for autism spectrum disorder.

The “Live Healthy” legislation passed in 2024 created an online portal that health care practitioners can utilize to advertise community events and services. Floridians can search for free screenings and services in their area. Live Healthy also created a grant program to support nonprofit entities that are providing no-cost screenings and health services. A nonprofit entity can receive a grant to begin providing new services or to expand the area it services.

Advances Early Steps Extended Option

The bill directs the Department of Health to apply for federal approval to extend eligibility for services under part C of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. If approved, families of children with developmental delays or disabilities would have the choice to continue receiving early intervention therapies and services in the Early Steps Program until the child turns four years old. Additionally, the bill expands services to include an educational component to promote school readiness and incorporate behavioral therapy, pre-literacy, language, and numeracy skills, among others.

Currently Early Steps services are available until the child turns three. After turning four, the child transitions to PreK-12 school. The bill includes requirements for planning and coordination of a child’s transition to school.

Establishes Coordination Through the UF Center for Autism and Neurodevelopment

The bill designates the Center for Autism and Neurodevelopment at the University of Florida as a coordinating hub for research, program administration, and best practices.

The center will do the following:

- Collaborate with state and local agencies that provide early intervention, educational, medical, employment, financial, and daily living services.
- Collaborate with other entities that provide autism research and services, including, but not limited to, the Centers for Autism and Related Disorders (CARD), the Florida Diagnostic and Learning Resources System (FDLRS), the Florida State University Autism Institute, the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, the Department of Health, the Department of Education, and the Department of Children and Families.
- Coordinate information and resources related to research, best practices, training, and public awareness to better support families of children with autism.
- Develop strategies to promote public awareness of the signs of autism, the importance of early screening, and interventions and supports available to families.
- Catalog and distribute best practices for screening, referral, diagnosis, and interventions; access to therapy services; and other licensed practitioner services using private and public insurance, to include access to services in schools.
- Review and approve applications for specialized summer programs.
- Administer startup grants for autism charter schools and provide technical assistance to grant applicants and recipients.
- Beginning August 1, 2026, publish a report detailing activities, expenditures, and outcomes from the previous year.

Creates Specialized Summer Programs for Students with Autism

Many children with autism face challenges during the summer months due to limited access to extended school year programs, summer school, and traditional summer camps that can accommodate their unique needs. The bill creates a grant program to support specialized summer programs that provide structured, supportive environments for children with autism, ensuring continuity of care, skill development, and social engagement.

The University of Florida Center for Autism and Neurodevelopment will administer the grant program. The summer programs must provide a structured schedule of activities including, but not limited to: behavioral and social skill development; recreational and leisure activities tailored to individual needs; therapy-based support, including speech, occupational, or behavioral therapies, when appropriate; and family support and training workshops.

Increases School Choice Options for Children with Autism

Students with autism spectrum disorder may require highly specialized educational environments and resources. The bill creates a grant program to support the creation of charter schools exclusively serving children with autism. The UF Center for Autism and Neurodevelopment will oversee the application, evaluation, and distribution of grants.

Grants are subject to appropriation in the state budget. Schools can use the grants to acquire, modify, or renovate facilities; purchase or develop specialized instructional materials, curriculum, assistive technology, and adaptive equipment; and recruitment, salaries, and training of staff experienced in working with students with autism and cognitive disabilities. Grants will be prioritized for schools serving rural and underserved areas, those with demonstrable success in establishing and operating a charter school exclusively for students with autism and related disorders, and programs that use existing facilities.

Develops Education Personnel Training Specific to Autism

The UF Center for Autism and Neurodevelopment will develop an autism micro-credential to allow instructional personnel to learn skills to support students with autism. The micro-credential will include training to identify behaviors associated with autism, support the learning environment in a classroom setting, promote the use of assistive technologies, and apply evidence-based practices in instruction. The micro-credential must be provided at no cost to instructional personnel and be competency based to allow instructional personnel to complete the credentialing process either in person or online. Instructional personnel may at any time during the training receive the micro-credential once competency is demonstrated.

The center will also develop strategies to increase the workforce qualified to provide autism-related services to children and adults in a public or private setting and develop and catalog professional learning activities for health care, child welfare, and instructional personnel.

For more information, please visit www.FLSenate.gov.

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