



# The Ohio Autism Scholarship Program

Stories from Grateful Families Across the State of Ohio



# Autism Scholarship Program

Children all across Ohio use the Autism Scholarship Program

Autism knows no racial, ethnic, social, income, or education boundaries. Autism can affect any family and any child, though it is four times more prevalent in boys than girls. Roughly 1 in 110 students is diagnosed on the autism spectrum.

The Autism Scholarship Program gives families in Ohio the chance to direct their child's education and ensure that they receive the services they need to become successful adults. It was created in 2003 to provide individualized learning options.

- Worth up to \$20,000 per year, it allows parents to choose from more than 200 service providers and private schools to find the right programs for their child.
- Preschool and school-age children diagnosed with autism are eligible, which enables families to access critical early intervention and special education services.



“ I discovered the Autism Scholarship when Tommi Lee was 13. She has come a long way from being extremely shy to very sociable. The focus at her new school is on her strengths instead of her deficits.”

—Toni Johnson, Tommi Lee's mother

Teenager Tommi Lee was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome when she was 5 years old.



# Fast Facts About Autism

The number of students in Ohio diagnosed with autism has doubled in the last five years

- Autism Spectrum Disorders are complex, lifelong, neurobiological disorders that involve impairments in communication, social, and behavior domains. These symptoms can range from very mild to severe.
- ASD includes three diagnoses: Autistic Disorder, Asperger's Syndrome, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS).
- Up to 1 in 110 students in the United States is diagnosed with autism, the nation's fastest-growing serious development disability.
- Despite long waiting lists for diagnoses, the number of students in Ohio diagnosed with autism continues to rise quickly.
- Characteristics of autism can be detected as early as 6 months old.

## Educational best practices for students with autism

Early intervention is critical to gain maximum benefit from existing therapies and has a huge impact on a student's educational trajectory. While there is no single treatment protocol for all children with autism, most individuals respond best to highly-structured behavioral programs. (*Autism Speaks*)

The measured intelligence of students with autism varies widely. Even students with a high IQ can still experience significant learning problems and benefit from accommodations in the classroom or in testing situations. However, the most difficult problems relate to the students' inability to recognize and respond to the behavior and communication of others.

For example, students with autism may not see the "big picture" or recognize all of the cues in their environment. Individualized programs are often the best option for children with autism. These programs include several components, such as speech therapy, social skill development, and behavioral therapy. No single option fills the needs of everyone with autism. (*Autism Society of Ohio*)

For more information on the Autism Scholarship visit us on the web at [www.schoio.org](http://www.schoio.org)





# Families in Their Own Words

Ohio families share their stories of school choice

“Benjamin is enrolled in an all-day mainstream kindergarten program... all the while receiving his autism intervention services. Our dreams for our son, once shattered, are being slowly pieced back together.”

—Lisa M.

“There is no way we could have financially afforded sending our son to private school without the help of the Ohio Autism Scholarship. I know the Ohio Autism Scholarship will continue to make a huge impact in Cameron's life, and we look forward to a bright future with our son.”

—The Huth Family

“Travis couldn't communicate and was basically helpless as far as his self-help skills were concerned. We heard about the Autism Scholarship and since then we have seen Travis advance in areas we never thought possible.”

—Patrick

“I only wish I had known sooner about the Autism Scholarship, I am so thankful for those who allow this program to exist.”

—Lisa D.

“Some of the most successful, intelligent people to grace our world are blessed with autistic traits. We cannot thank the Autism Scholarship enough — thank you for giving us our Wyatt back and allowing him to flourish!”

—Wendy





“Our twin boys were diagnosed with autism at age 3. We applied for every type of assistance available and fell through the cracks on all of them except the Autism Scholarship. If it were not for the Autism Scholarship, we believe that our boys would not have gotten the appropriate services they needed and would not be where they are today.”

—Tim & Cathy

“In the public school, Nathaniel struggled academically as well as socially. He was often left out and excluded because he was ‘different.’ The scholarship gave us an educational choice where he can thrive and exceed the expectations of others.”

—Kathryn

“I wish all 50 states adopted this program. It is so needed and gives parents options.”

—Christine

“I remind myself often what a great thing it is that we live in Ohio and that we have such a wonderful program as the Autism Scholarship. It has given us funding so that we might attain great progress in our son's life by attending a school that we otherwise could not afford.”

—Nancy



# Kelly Lutz

Mother of Tyler, age 6

We have used the Autism Scholarship since my son's third birthday, and now he is six-years old. We have used the Autism Scholarship to pay for a wonderful speech therapist that my son sees weekly and for in-home applied behavior analysis (ABA) tutors that

work with him on a daily basis. My son's gains from all the individualized 1-on-1 therapy hours has made an incredible difference in his progress.

He could barely speak when we started, was very delayed in fine and gross motor skills, and had a difficult time sitting still and participating in any activity for more than a few minutes. Since we have been using the scholarship money to pay for his 1-on-1 therapy, he is completely verbal, has age appropriate skills, and is able to stay attentive and participate at



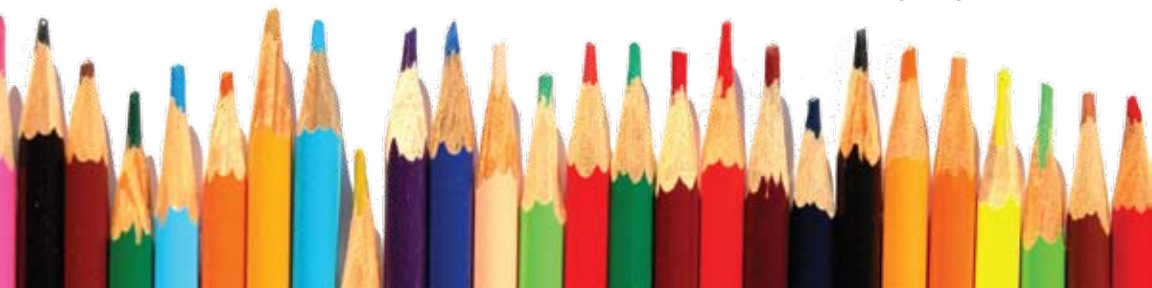
length in group and individual activities.

We could not have afforded all of the in-home therapy and speech hours without the scholarship. This money has been crucial for his development. We are grateful to the Autism Scholarship, and our son will have the opportunity to attend a typical kindergarten class with minimal assistance in the fall.

The Lutz family is like many families who use the Autism Scholarship for specialized services while their child is still young. This early intervention often allows their children to attend public school in a typical "mainstream" classroom when they otherwise would have required an aide or more specialized services.

Other families use the scholarship to attend a private school devoted especially to students with autism and developing the specific life skills they need. Recognizing that a cookie cutter approach is not appropriate, the Autism Scholarship gives parents flexibility to access the educational setting that is best for their child.

*We are grateful to the Autism Scholarship and our son will have the opportunity to attend a typical kindergarten class with minimal assistance in the fall.*



# Janie & Michael Pendley

Parents of Dylan, age 4



We are the parents of a wonderful, rambunctious, loving little boy named Dylan who has autism. Dylan will turn 4 on April 11, and the progress that he has made since receiving the scholarship is remarkable.

Dylan was non-verbal when we began this journey. When we first received the news that he would be diagnosed with autism, my husband and I began to prepare ourselves for what was to be our son's future and the future of our family. Any parent will tell you that they have all these hopes and dreams for their children's lives. Highly motivated to help my son, I still went through a period of mourning the life that I thought my son would miss out on. Tensions were high in our household, and it felt like no one in our family was on the same page. All the while, there was this little boy who smiled and loved everyone he met—never wavering.

We are originally from Kentucky. I knew that I would need a strong support system to get through this. However, I found that Kentucky doesn't have any specific autism programs, scholarships, or schools available. So, moving home was not an option. If it wasn't for the scholarship in Ohio, we would not have been able to get him the services he needs. We would still be out there looking for some hope for our son.

Dylan began attending Helping Hands Center in July 2009, and the scholarship kicked in in October. It came at a time when we had maxed out our finances. Dylan began speaking (not babbling) in November 2009. I remember that day so clearly. I picked him up from school and he wanted to go to Target. I said "No," and he began expressing to me his displeasure with this. Halfway home, I realized I was having an argument with my son. Yay!

Dylan has come so far and I can only imagine where he will go thanks to the Autism Scholarship Program. From the bottom of our hearts, thank you!

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The Ohio Autism Scholarship has become recognized nationally within the autism community as an innovative program that allows Ohio families to find the best fit for their child's education.



# Pam Wells

Grandparent of J.J., age 4



When I first heard the word “autism,” little did I know how it would impact our lives. J.J. is a wonderful blessing that Grandpa and I have raised since birth. When J.J. was a year old, we noticed things weren’t quite “right.” He was not doing things that other babies normally do at his age. He made no sounds, no cooing, no baby babbling, and he didn’t make eye contact. He really seemed like he didn’t want cuddled like most babies. He showed no interest in toys of any kind.

The odd behavior caused us great worry and after much prodding by our pediatrician, he finally sent us to a neurologist at the Cleveland Rainbow Baby and Children’s Hospital. After talking with us, going over medical records and spending 45 minutes of intense 1-on-1 with J.J., he asked us a question that I will never forget, “Do you know what autism is?” We answered him that we have heard of it, but really didn’t know much about it. He then pointed at J.J. and stated “You are looking at an autistic child. He displays all the symptoms of classic autism.”

I remember flooding him with questions: “What now? What do we do? How do you fix this?” He went on to tell us J.J. needed extensive behavioral and therapy services at a facility that deals with autistic children. His exact prescription was: “He needs to be at the Rich Center. They will be able to help him.”

The ride home from Cleveland was a long, quiet ride, as my husband and I were just trying to process all that we had just been told. We were concerned as to how we could pay for this autism school. My husband has worked in the same factory for 32 years—



we are grandparents on a tight budget. But we were both prepared to get extra jobs to pay for whatever J.J. needed. We prayed a lot, as did all our friends and family.

When I contacted the Rich Center I was told about the Autism Scholarship Program. Are you kidding me? J.J. can get a scholarship to pay for the help he desperately needs? An answer to our prayers!

J.J. is on the scholarship and words cannot ever begin to express our thanks and appreciation. J.J. has come so far! He is receiving the services he needs to excel, and that's what he is doing! Without this scholarship program, I do not know what we would do, or where we would go to get him the help he needs. It has not only helped J.J., but has helped us learn more about autism. Seeing how they work with him at his school, we are better understanding how to work with him at home.

I used to become very downhearted at the thought that J.J. may always be non-verbal, but after seeing his progress I no longer ask "Will he ever speak?" Now I say "When he speaks he will probably never shut up!" And you know what? That's okay!

**THANK YOU** for the Autism Scholarship Program. It is a lifesaver, as it provides hope for J.J.'s future.

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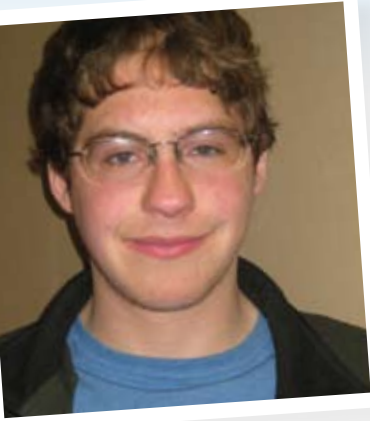
Early intervention for kids like J.J. is critical to gain maximum benefit from therapies and has a huge impact on a student's educational trajectory.

“He is receiving the services he needs to excel, and that's what he is doing! Without this scholarship program, I do not know what we would do, or where we would go to get him the help he needs.”



# Kevin Carr

An 18 yr. old student who can continue to use the autism scholarship through graduation



The Autism Scholarship improved my life by helping me to communicate more, express my emotions, have better confidence in myself, and be a more active person in my job and community.

My communication is better because I learned how to verbalize my thoughts so that everyone can understand what I am trying to say. Back then, when I first came to this school, I confused people by speaking without thinking through my thoughts. When someone was talking about fishing or hunting, I blurted out baseball because I wanted

to talk about what I wanted. Now I am thinking through my thoughts and taking the time to communicate with people.

Expressing my emotions has become easier and I tell people how I feel. Telling my mom when I am sick and telling the teachers when I am having a bad day have helped me to express myself when I am not feeling well. I use calming techniques like reading, counting down, listening to calming music, and fidgeting with marbles in my pocket to help me calm down.

I am more confident about myself when I meet new people. Walking up to them and saying, "Hi, how are you?" without being nervous or afraid gives me more confidence. The teachers at the Bryan Center have helped me by convincing and pushing me to have conversations with the other students at the school as well as residents at the nursing home.

Before I came to this school, I was a lazy, sit-on-the-couch bum. Now I assist my mom by doing chores and helping around the house. Before I was growling and complaining and needing several prompts. Now I growl and complain on the inside, but I do the work after one prompt.

*I am more confident about myself when I meet new people. Walking up to them and saying, "Hi how are you?" without being nervous or afraid gives me more confidence.*



# About School Choice Ohio

*Because every family should be free to choose the right school for their child*

Ohio leads the nation in offering meaningful options for parents who want to provide a better education for their children, through three stellar school choice initiatives—the Educational Choice Scholarship Program, the Autism Scholarship Program, and the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Program.

School Choice Ohio is a nonprofit organization committed to the goal of every child in Ohio having access to a quality education. Because this is not yet a reality, the organization works tirelessly to educate Ohioans on the importance of empowering parents to find the best educational setting for the needs of their children. School Choice Ohio believes that all parents should have the opportunity to choose which school is best for their children, regardless of their income level.

“The Autism Scholarship has been an absolute blessing for our family. Because of it, our son Nathan has been able to learn and grow in ways we never thought were possible.”  
—Julie

If you are interested in learning more about the Autism Scholarship or School Choice Ohio, please visit School Choice Ohio’s website at [www.schoio.org](http://www.schoio.org). There you can voice your support for the Autism Scholarship, donate to support our outreach, and learn about Ohio’s other important scholarship programs.

“School Choice Ohio has been a strong and consistent advocate for Ohio parents who are looking for the best place and appropriate services which will enable their child to learn, succeed and become independent and self-sufficient.”  
—Jon Peterson  
Member, Ohio House of Representatives (1999-2008)

“Thanks for working hard to give parents like me better options for our children’s education.”  
—Nichole





## School Choice Ohio

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Promoting Equal Access To Quality Educational Options

