



SCHOOL VOUCHERS

Ensuring Quality Education Choices for Wisconsin Families of Children with Disabilities: Concerns About Special Needs “Scholarships”

BACKGROUND ON SCHOOL VOUCHERS

Families often struggle to obtain a quality education for their children with disabilities. The legislature’s sole response to this concern has been to introduce “special needs scholarships” or vouchers offering public tax dollars to families to use at private schools. Wisconsin has the benefit of reviewing how vouchers have worked for families in other states. This review found troubling results. In part, due to problems with vouchers in other states, no statewide disability or special education administrator organization in Wisconsin supports special needs vouchers. Organizations are instead working to improve other safe and high-quality education choices for families.

WHAT DO FAMILIES AND STUDENTS GIVE UP WHEN THEY ACCEPT A VOUCHER?

- The guarantee a child won’t be turned away – either at the door or sent back mid-semester. Voucher proposals will not require private schools to accept children with disabilities.
- The guarantee to any special education or related services such as therapies or assistive technology. Even if a voucher proposal says an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) will be required and implemented, schools are not required to provide specific services or supports.
- The guarantee that a professional with training will support a child. Recent Wisconsin voucher proposals have not required qualified special educators or therapists to be on staff.
- The right to keep a child safe from harmful and abusive practices, like seclusion and restraint. These protective laws do not apply in private schools.
- All rights under state and federal special education law, the strongest education law in the world. If things go wrong in a voucher school, families’ only option is to return to the public school.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED IN OTHER STATES?

FLORIDA operates the nation’s largest and longest-running special needs voucher system.

- The *St. Petersburg Times* found that schools have “popped up overnight by the lure of easy money” and found “outdated text books, unqualified teachers, physical abuse, lack of specialized services, and schools that cash voucher checks for students who are no longer enrolled.”¹
- In 2004, school officials at one private Florida school stole \$200,000 in voucher and other state education money.² A Tampa school named in a federal terrorism indictment received \$350,000 in voucher money.³
- A 2011 Florida investigation turned up the story of Christopher Vaughn who enrolled in a school his grandmother heard about at church. In 2010 when he decided to transfer schools, no school would accept his records. His poor education meant as an 18-year-old, he had to return as a freshman.⁴
- A 2011 *Miami New Times* called the Florida special education voucher system “a perverse science experiment, using disabled school kids as lab rats and funded by nine figures in taxpayer cash.”

OHIO runs the Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship Program and the Autism Scholarship Program.

- A 2008 program study concluded that vouchers are “a poor model” that “should not be emulated in other states.”⁵ Problems cited include selective admission; the majority of providers “offered services such as tutoring or therapy” rather than a “classroom setting”; lack of oversight and accountability; and voucher students placed in restrictive settings.”⁶
- The Ohio study also found that a majority of schools limited enrollment, either by accepting only less severely disabled children, by charging more than the maximum voucher amount, or by requiring religious instruction.”⁷



CONCERNS ABOUT SPECIAL NEEDS VOUCHERS FOR WISCONSIN

- Voucher program proposals have limited accountability – either for fraud or for educational quality and outcomes.
- With less special education funding, local school districts - particularly small rural districts - will face additional financial hardship.
- Wisconsin disability service providers can double dip. There will be a financial incentive to establish a school, perhaps combining the voucher with Wisconsin's Medicaid funding for autism or other disability services, and making a profit using taxpayer dollars without accountability for results.
- Segregated, unregulated schools will expand as they have in other states.
- The program is not fiscally sound. Previous Wisconsin proposals have guaranteed that a child can keep the voucher until they graduate or turn 21 without being re-evaluated. This means that even if the child no longer needs special education services, they can take public tax dollars from their neighborhood public school for their entire educational career.
- A voucher program takes money out of public schools, impacting the remaining children with disabilities, often those with the most significant disabilities who private schools will not accept.
- Voucher programs lack transparency. Parents need facts and access to the complete record of a school to make a sound decision, but voucher schools have only minimal reporting requirements.
- Voucher proposals further threaten the already fragile financial viability of Wisconsin's highly valued small, local school districts.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO IMPROVE SCHOOL CHOICE FOR PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES?

Wisconsin's open enrollment law has several rules that many parents find discriminatory. Students with disabilities can be denied enrollment in a choice public school for vague reasons like "undue financial burden" or "lack of special education space." Students can even be turned back to their home school in mid-year with little right to appeal. Disability organizations are actively working with other education groups to improve open enrollment to address these concerns. Public school open enrollment provisions must be more flexible to allow for safe school choice options before Wisconsin develops a special needs voucher program that has failed in other states.

In addition, public schools often cite strained funding as a reason they struggle to provide supports to children with disabilities. Wisconsin has chronically decreased the portion of funding it provides to special education over the last two decades. Instead of spending scarce taxpayer dollars on unregulated special needs vouchers that have not been proven to improve outcomes in other states, Wisconsin should invest in the high-cost and other special education funds that can benefit all students.

¹ National Council on Disability. School Vouchers and Students with Disabilities. April 2003.

² Kimberly Miller & S.V. Date. "Seven Charged in Voucher Scam False Claims by School Alleged." *Palm Beach Post* 30 June 2004.

³ S.V. Date. "Voucher Oversight Remains Minimal." *Palm Beach Post* 1 July 2004.

⁴ Garcia-Roberts, Gus. "McKay scholarship program sparks a cottage industry of fraud and chaos." *Miami New Times* 23 June 2011.

⁵ Policy Matters Ohio, Analyzing Autism Vouchers in Ohio, Executive Summary, 2 (Mar. 2008), http://www.policymattersohio.org/pdf/AnalyzingAutismVouchers2008_0319.pdf.

⁶ Id., Executive Summary at 1–2.

⁷ Analyzing Autism Vouchers in Ohio at 41.