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## Briefing Paper: Ohio's Autism Scholarship Program

In 2004 the Ohio Autism Scholarship Program began as a pilot project for children with autism. By 2007, 734 families received scholarships for up to \$20,000 a year per student. A larger voucher program that would expand vouchers to all students with disabilities passed through the Ohio General Assembly in 2007 but was vetoed by the governor.<sup>i</sup>

- **Fewer than 1 in 10 Ohio students with autism actually participate in the state's voucher program.** As of December 2006, about 500 families had joined the voucher program. About half of the children ranged in age from 3 to 5 years old. The Ohio Department of Education estimates that between 5,400 and 6,000 school-age children in Ohio have autism.<sup>ii</sup>
- **Ohio's voucher program for students with autism largely benefits families living in major urban areas with access to private service providers.** For the first quarter of the 2004-05 school year, the state had 270 approved applicants to the program. The majority of applicants lived primarily in or around Ohio's major urban centers.<sup>iii</sup>
- **Private voucher schools do not provide students with severe autism a standard classroom learning environment.**
  - Only 10 percent of 127 surveyed providers in the first quarter of 2008 offered 'school-like' environments to students with severe autism.<sup>iv</sup> 75 percent of claims made in the first quarter were for vouchers at private institutions who offered non-integrated classes for students with autism.<sup>v</sup>
  - One school accepting vouchers, the Lawrence School, will not admit students "for whom the lead diagnosis is autism."<sup>vi</sup>
- **The increasing cost of vouchers still does not cover the full cost of private providers of services for children with autism.** In the 2007 fiscal year, Ohio made permanent the pilot voucher program for students with autism and lifted the cap on the number of students who could enroll. The cost of each voucher also increased from \$15,000 to \$20,000.<sup>vii</sup> Private providers may charge more than \$60,000 a year, higher than many families can afford.<sup>viii</sup>
- **Private providers get money from publicly funded vouchers for autistic children, but the burden of tracking students' progress remains with public schools.** The public school district where a child lives still has responsibility for the child's initial multi-factored evaluation, all subsequent evaluations and the annual Individualized Education Program. That local school district also must maintain contact with the private provider for accurate and timely progress reports on the child.<sup>ix</sup>
- **Funding lost to vouchers is creating severe budget problems in Ohio schools.** Proponents argue that vouchers improve public schools by fostering competition. Yet with the loss of students and funding, Ohio public school districts are finding it difficult to compete with the private schools. The Columbus school district lost 15 students in 2005, equaling funding of approximately \$200,000. Mary Ey, overseer of Columbus' special education department feels the loss has "hurt us from being innovative. If we were not having that money leave, I think we could divert it to create (an autism-only) team" of specialists.<sup>x</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Policy Matters Ohio. "Analyzing Autism Vouchers in Ohio." <http://www.policymattersohio.org/AnalyzingAutismVouchers.htm> (Accessed 1-24-09)

<sup>ii</sup> "More Autistic Children sparks Statewide Program Growth." *Associated Press*. 12-4-06.

<sup>iii</sup> "Formative Evaluation of Ohio's Autism Scholarship Program." Legislative Office of Education Oversight. Columbus, Ohio, May 2005.

<sup>iv</sup> Policy Matters Ohio. "Analyzing Autism Vouchers in Ohio." <http://www.policymattersohio.org/AnalyzingAutismVouchers.htm> -1-24-09.

<sup>v</sup> Testimony on the Autism Scholarship Program Senate Education Committee April 1, 2008. *Policy Matters Ohio*. [http://www.policymattersohio.org/pdf/TestimonyOnTheAutismScholarshipProgram2008\\_0401.pdf](http://www.policymattersohio.org/pdf/TestimonyOnTheAutismScholarshipProgram2008_0401.pdf)

<sup>vi</sup> Policy Matters Ohio. "Analyzing Autism Vouchers in Ohio." <http://www.policymattersohio.org/AnalyzingAutismVouchers.htm> -1-24-09.

<sup>vii</sup> "Ohio Creates One of the Nation's Largest Voucher Programs." *The Heartland Institute*. 09-2005 and also, "Assembly OKs 200 Scholarships for Pilot Program for Autistic Kids." *The Capital Times*. 12-14-05.

<sup>viii</sup> "Ohio program helps children with autism," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 12-4-06.

<sup>ix</sup> "Formative Evaluation of Ohio's Autism Scholarship Program." Legislative Office of Education Oversight. Columbus, Ohio, May 2005.

<sup>x</sup> "Renew Aid for Autistic Student, Parents Say." *Columbus Dispatch*. 4-11-05.





## Briefing Paper: Utah's Special Needs Voucher Plan

The Carson Smith Special Needs Scholarship program is Utah's first private school voucher program. Enacted in March 2005, the program pays up to \$6,285 per voucher for students with disabilities to attend private schools (as of 2008-2009).<sup>i</sup> The program offers vouchers to children with special needs, including students with autism, traumatic brain injuries, serious emotional disturbances, learning disabilities, or hearing, vision, speech or language impairments.<sup>ii</sup>

- **Utah lawmakers sliced more than \$900,000 from Utah's special education budget to pay for the voucher program.** They appropriated \$2.6 million from the state's general fund for the program's first year.<sup>iii</sup>
- **In the 2005-2006 school year 54,000 students were eligible for the special needs scholarship while only 2 percent actually received assistance.**<sup>iv</sup>
- **Utah has already loosened protections for students using vouchers and for taxpayers who pay for them.**
  - Initially the program required that private schools accepting vouchers actually specialize in serving special education students. In 2006 the Utah Legislature lowered that standard, opening the program to private schools that had previously served students with disabilities even if they had not specialized in serving those students.<sup>v</sup>
  - Lawmakers weakened the requirement that private schools demonstrate fiscal soundness through an audit and an opinion letter from a certified public accountant. The law now permits private schools to skip the more rigorous audit.<sup>vi</sup>
- **The voucher program imposes an extra financial burden on school districts by requiring that they notify in writing all parents of students with disabilities of their eligibility to participate in the program.**<sup>vii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> "State's School-Voucher Program is under Way." Ronnie Lynn, *Salt Lake Tribune*, 3-11-05., State of Utah Office of Education, Special Needs Scholarship Program Description 2008-2009. [http://www.schools.utah.gov/admin/documents/2008-09\\_Program\\_Description.pdf](http://www.schools.utah.gov/admin/documents/2008-09_Program_Description.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> "House OKs Vouchers for Disabled Students." Jessica Ravitz, *Salt Lake Tribune*, 2-22-05.

<sup>iii</sup> "State's School-Voucher Program is under Way," Ronnie Lynn, *The Salt Lake Tribune*, 3-11-2005; "Special education backers hope for restoration of funds," *Deseret Morning News*, 3-3-05.

<sup>iv</sup> Van Tassel, Royce. Utah Enacts Voucher Program for Special-Needs Students, *School Reform News, the Heartland Institut.*, 5-1-05. <http://www.newcoalition.org/Article.cfm?artId=16875>

<sup>v</sup> Text of H.B. 351 Enrolled, 2006 General Session, Utah State Legislature <http://www.le.state.ut.us/~2006/bills/hbillenr/hb0351.htm> - 1-18-07; "House Widens Scope of Carson Smith Eligibility," *Deseret Morning News*, 2-24-06.

<sup>vi</sup> Text of H.B. 351 Enrolled, 2006 General Session, Utah State Legislature <http://www.le.state.ut.us/~2006/bills/hbillenr/hb0351.htm> - 1-18-07; "House Widens Scope of Carson Smith Eligibility," *Deseret Morning News*, 2-24-06.

<sup>vii</sup> Text of H.B. 351 Enrolled, 2006 General Session, Utah State Legislature <http://www.le.state.ut.us/~2006/bills/hbillenr/hb0351.htm> - 1-18-07; "House Widens Scope of Carson Smith Eligibility," *Deseret Morning News*, 2-24-06.





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## Briefing Paper: Florida's Special Needs Voucher Program

The Florida McKay Scholarship Program originated in 2000 for families with disabled students in the Florida schools where the parent was dissatisfied with their student progress. The program was significantly expanded in 2001.<sup>i</sup>

### FLORIDA'S PROGRAM DRAINS MILLIONS OF TAX DOLLARS FROM PUBLIC SCHOOLS.

- In 2003, the program's cost reached \$53 million, more than the program's total cost in its first 3 years.<sup>ii</sup> That amount has now more than doubled, with McKay Scholarships costing over \$131 million in the 2007-2008 school year.<sup>iii</sup>
- Vouchers have a negative impact on local school budgets. For example, a 2003 report found that Pinellas County — one of Florida's largest school districts — fell \$7.3 million short of budget for education funding. Most of the shortfall was a result of the McKay program.<sup>iv</sup>

### FLORIDA'S PRIVATE SCHOOLS HAVE BEEN RELUCTANT TO TAKE VOUCHER STUDENTS.

- Schools enrolled in the McKay program are not widely accessible: 12 counties, out of 67 total in Florida, do not have participating private schools. Another 14 counties only have one participating private school.<sup>v</sup>
- Many private schools early on said they had waiting lists and could not accommodate public school students.<sup>vi</sup> Florida private school administrators also objected to the provision that private schools must accept all eligible applicants for available seats.<sup>vii</sup>

### FLORIDA'S PROGRAM FAILS CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS.

- In 2003 about 77 percent of Florida private schools taking tax dollars to educate disabled students did not offer special classes for those children. The state did not require private school teachers to be certified to teach special education or even to teach at all.<sup>viii</sup>
- Once parents use a voucher to transfer their children to private schools, they have effectively opted out of the legal rights and educational services guaranteed under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.<sup>ix</sup> Participating private schools are exempt from special education requirements that public schools must meet, including educator training and student assessment. Private schools accepting vouchers are not required to monitor students' progress, nor must they offer special education services to their students at all.
- Private schools are not required to accept the state voucher as full payment. The additional costs are often prohibitive for low-income students and students with special needs. Public schools, on the other hand, are required to meet the needs of a student with disabilities or pay the *full* cost for that student to attend another school offering adequate services.<sup>x</sup>
- McKay schools may discriminate on the basis of religion, gender or disability.<sup>xi</sup>

### FLORIDA'S PROGRAM PROVIDES NO EVIDENCE OF IMPROVED STUDENT PERFORMANCE AND OFFERS NO ACCOUNTABILITY.

- The state does not "grade" the performance of private schools (as it does public schools) and therefore has no way to assess whether voucher students are actually moving to an academically superior school compared to the school they would otherwise attend.<sup>xii</sup>
- For the 2003-2004 school year, 13,345 (55 percent) of the state's vouchers were used at private schools without accreditation from one of the 12 major private school accrediting organizations.<sup>xiii</sup>
- According to one study of parents in Duval County, a large percentage of parents with special education students did not receive all the information they wanted regarding which schools to enroll their children in.<sup>xiv</sup>



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- ii "Jeopardizing a Legacy: A Closer Look at IDEA and Florida's Disability Vouchers," *People for the American Way and the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund*, 3- 03.
- iii Florida Department of Education: "John M. McKay Scholarship Program." June Quarterly Report 2008. At <http://www.floridaschoolchoice.org> - 10- 7-08.
- iv "Jeopardizing a Legacy: A Closer Look at IDEA and Florida's Disability Voucher Program," *People for the American Way and the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund*, 3-03.
- v John M. McKay Scholarship Program February 2007 Quarterly Report. Florida Department of Education. 2-07.  
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- vi "Will there be room in Collier private schools for voucher students?," *Naples Daily News*, 2-13-00; "Long takes exception to voucher proposal," *The Tampa Tribune*, 2-9-01; "Educators united in opposition to voucher proposal," *Orlando Sentinel*, 2-9-01.
- vii "The Voucher Experiment: A Matter of Choice? That Depends," *St. Petersburg Times*, 10-19-98.
- viii "Vouchers don't help disabled students," *Palm Beach Post*, 12-8-03.
- ix "Jeopardizing a Legacy: A Closer Look at IDEA and Florida's Disability Voucher Program," *People for the American Way and the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund*, 3-03.
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- xii "Voucher Program Flunks Special Ed," *New York Times*, 6-19-02.
- xiii "Push Grows for Voucher Accreditation," *Palm Beach Post*, 2 -9-04.
- xiv Mead, Sara. "Information Underload: Florida's Flawed Special-Ed Voucher Program." *Education Sector Reports*. June 2007. 2-6-09.