

Learning how vouchers help disabled children

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New Jersey's special-education enrollment rate is the third highest in the nation. As it continues to rise, more and more disabled students will be placed into a special-education system that pretty much everyone agrees is inadequate. New Jersey should consider alternatives to the current system for ensuring the delivery of services to disabled students. Evidence from a Florida program shows that where school vouchers have been offered to disabled students, they have improved the education those students receive.

Florida's McKay Scholarship Program provides a voucher to disabled students in Florida public schools. The program is open to all disabled students; there are no means tests or other restrictions on participation. With more than 12,000 students participating, it's one of the nation's largest voucher programs. A Manhattan Institute study of the program shows that disabled students using the vouchers received better services in a number of ways.

One of the most dramatic advantages New Jersey's disabled students could expect from vouchers is smaller classes. Florida participants' classes averaged 25 students in their previous public schools, but their classes averaged only 13 students in voucher schools. For the large majority of special-education students who have mild diagnoses like learning disabilities or speech impediments, the personal attention of small classes can make a big difference in their academic progress.

Another important service private schools could provide New Jersey's disabled students is a safer learning environment. In their previous public schools, 47 percent of Florida participants were bothered often by other students because of their disabilities and 25 percent were physically assaulted, while in voucher schools, only 5 percent were bothered often and 6 percent were assaulted. Disabled stu-

dents are particularly vulnerable to victimization by their peers, and private schools can enact tougher discipline policies that allow them to protect disabled students.

New Jersey's disabled students could also see a drop in behavior problems at school.

Among participating students in Florida, 40 percent had behavior problems at their previous public schools, but only 19 percent had behavior problems at voucher schools. Private schools seem to be helping special-education students learn to improve their behavior, and for many dis-

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abled children, that's as important to their development as academic progress.

Participating parents in Florida's program overwhelmingly report that they receive better services in their voucher schools than in their previous public schools. Only 24 percent had been satisfied with the services addressing their children's disabilities at their public schools, while 89 percent were satisfied at voucher schools.

They also report that their students make better academic progress. While 17 percent were satisfied with their children's academic progress at public schools, 93 percent were satisfied with their academic progress at voucher schools.

Overall, 93 percent of parents whose students are using special-education vouchers say they're satisfied with their voucher schools. Only 33 percent say that they were satisfied with the public schools their children were in before they participated in the voucher program.

Not only do current participants report better services and higher satisfaction with their voucher schools, but former participants do, as well. If anyone were going to report having had a worse experience in voucher schools, you would expect it to be people who have exited the program. But on almost every measurement, former participants in the special-education voucher program got superior services at private schools. In fact, 91 percent of former participants say the special-education voucher program should continue to be available for those who wish to use it.

Why is the program so successful? One important reason is that it provides private schools with the full resources necessary to serve disabled students, rather than offering just a fraction of public-school spending like most voucher programs. Another is that it provides schools with a powerful incentive to serve disabled students — schools want to keep students from walking out the door and they know that with vouchers, parents can leave for a different school if they don't provide the services parents expect.

This evidence clearly shows that allowing disabled students to use vouchers has made a difference in the lives of thousands of Florida children by giving them a much-needed escape from the notoriously rigid and unresponsive special-education bureaucracy in the public school system, allowing them to seek better services elsewhere. New Jersey's disabled students would be grateful if the state learned from Florida's experience.

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