

Can school choice help students with special needs?

YES

Providing school choice to students with special needs allows families unhappy with their assigned public schools to find a program that meets their children's individual needs.

As of 2013, after 14 years of operation, Florida's John M. McKay Scholarships for Students with Disabilities Program has more than 26,000 participating students, which is the largest program of its kind in the country.

Private schools are not typically highly selective, and many times are better equipped to educate students with disabilities.

MYTH: Private schools cannot serve and exclude students with special needs.

Many people are under the impression private schools are highly selective in accepting students. Private schools are widely thought to weed out the less desirable students and select only the best. Because of this perception, many are concerned that vouchers will "cream-skim" the best students from public schools, leaving them with the more "difficult" students.

Students with disabilities present a particular area of concern. There is a widespread perception that private schools do not serve disabled students well, whereas public schools do.

FACT: Private schools are not typically highly selective.

Private schools exist to serve and help as many students as they can. That's their mission. Moreover, private schools benefit when they maximize their enrollments. The available evidence does not support the perception that private schools are on average highly selective in admissions; it points to the conclusion that private schools seek a broad student base.

Although private schools do not usually have large and expensive special-education bureaucracies, they do provide special-education services. The empirical evidence indicates that private schools have a better track record of providing necessary special-education services than do public schools.

EVIDENCE: Studies refute the notion that private schools are highly selective.

The available evidence indicates private schools are not highly selective. The best empirical study on this question compared students participating in voucher programs in New York, Washington, D.C., and Dayton to representative samples of the general population. It found there were no important differences between voucher applicants and the general population on a variety of demographic and academic factors. Evaluations of private voucher programs in Charlotte and San Antonio showed similar results.¹

Moreover, some school choice programs, like the Milwaukee voucher program for example, require every participating private school to accept all voucher students. If the number of applicants exceeds the number of available slots at a school then students are chosen by random lottery. Notably, programs with "anti-creaming" provisions have a consistent track record of success.²

Meanwhile, contrary to widespread perception, public schools do not serve all students. Public high schools expel approximately 1 percent of their students each year. Another 0.6 percent of public high school students are placed in specialized schools, so they are not served by their neighborhood public schools.³ Additionally, the education of 1.5 percent of all disabled students in public schools is contracted out to private schools that can better handle their special needs.⁴

FACT: Evidence indicates private schools better serve many students with special needs.

Empirical research shows when parents are empowered with vouchers, they actually are more likely to obtain the desired services for their children.

In one study, participants in Florida's McKay voucher program were surveyed to see how likely they were to get services in their private school relative to their previous public school. Only 30.2 percent of voucher participants said they received all services required under federal law from their public school, whereas 86 percent reported their choice school provided all the services they promised to provide. Moreover, 47 percent of participants were bothered often and 25 percent were physically assaulted at their previous public schools because of their disabilities, compared to 5 percent bothered often and 6 percent assaulted in their choice schools. Finally, more than 90 percent of former McKay participants who have left the program said the McKay program should continue to be available for those who wish to use it.⁵

In addition, another large survey found "almost 90 percent of McKay respondents...were satisfied or very satisfied with

the school their child attends, whereas only 71.4 percent of public school respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with the school their child attends.”⁶

In short, school choice policies for special education allow parents to find a school that matches their children’s individual needs. That is why more than 35,000 students participate in school choice programs exclusively serving students with disabilities in Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Utah.

MYTH: Special-education vouchers will harm public schools.

Some argue that if students with special needs depart from public schools, that will undermine the ability of the remaining students with special needs to get an appropriate education. Vouchers could drain resources and talent from the public schools, making it harder for them to serve their students with special needs.

FACT: Special-education vouchers encourage public schools to improve.

Just as is the case with vouchers in general, a special-education voucher that allows students with disabilities to leave can motivate public schools to serve their remaining students better.

One study examined whether the academic achievement of students with special needs was affected by the number of options they had, if they left their public school with a voucher. In Florida, as more private schools that accept McKay funding opened near each public school, the standardized test scores of students with disabilities who remained in public schools increased significantly. The addition of about seven public schools with McKay funding within five miles of a public school improved the academic achievement of students with special needs by about .05 of a standard deviation.

Virtually all Florida students with disabilities in public schools take the state-mandated test, so improvement in test results suggests schools were serving those students better when they faced more competition from the McKay program. Vouchers do not drain public schools of their ability to serve disabled students; instead, schools are pushed to serve those students better.⁷ In fact, results from a 2011 study on the McKay program suggest the voucher program tends to have a positive impact on the math and reading performances of students in public schools.⁸

TABLE 1 School Choice Programs Limited to Students with Special Needs

State	Program	Year Enacted
Mississippi	Nate Rogers Scholarship for Students with Disabilities Program	2013
South Carolina	Educational Credit for Exceptional Needs Children	2013
Mississippi	Mississippi Dyslexia Therapy Scholarship for Students with Dyslexia Program	2012
Arizona	Empowerment Scholarship Accounts*	2011
North Carolina	Tax Credits for Children with Disabilities [†]	2011
Ohio	Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship Program	2011
Louisiana	School Choice Pilot Program for Certain Students with Exceptionalities	2010
Oklahoma	Lindsey Nicole Henry Scholarships for Students with Disabilities	2010
Arizona	Lexie’s Law Corporate Tax Credits [‡]	2009
Georgia	Georgia Special Needs Scholarship Program	2007
Utah	Carson Smith Special Needs Scholarship Program	2005
Ohio	Autism Scholarship Program	2003
Florida	John M. McKay Scholarships for Students with Disabilities Program	1999

*Expanded in 2012 to include C, D, and F schools. [†]Transformed into a voucher program in 2013 to include families qualifying for the free and reduced-price lunch program. [‡]Also includes children in foster care.

NOTES

1. William Howell and Paul Peterson, *The Education Gap: Vouchers and Urban Schools* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2002) revised 2006, pp. 61-65. For further evidence on this issue, see Jay P. Greene, *Education Myths: What Special-Interest Groups Want You to Believe About our Schools—and Why It Isn’t So* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), pp. 162-64.
2. See Greg Forster, “A Win-Win Solution: The Empirical Evidence on School Choice,” The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice (April 2013) for more information.
3. Jay P. Greene, *Education Myths: What Special-Interest Groups Want You to Believe About our Schools—and Why It Isn’t So* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), pp. 162-64.
4. Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters, “Debunking a Special Education Myth,” *Education Next* 7, no. 2 (Spring 2007), pp. 67-71.

5. Jay P. Greene and Greg Forster, “Vouchers for Special Education Students: An Evaluation of Florida’s McKay Scholarship Program,” Manhattan Institute Civic Report No. 38 (June 2003).
6. Virginia R. Weidner and Carol D. Herrington, “Are Parents Informed Consumers: Evidence from the Florida McKay Scholarship Program,” *Peabody Journal of Education* 81, no. 1 (2006), pp. 27-56.
7. Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters, “The Effect of Special Education Vouchers on Public School Achievement: Evidence From Florida’s McKay Scholarship Program,” Manhattan Institute Civic Report No. 52 (April 2008).
8. Marcus Winters and Jay P. Greene, “Public School Response to Special Education Vouchers: The Impact of Florida’s McKay Scholarship Program on Disability Diagnosis and Student Achievement in Public Schools,” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 33, no. 2 (June 2011), pp. 138-58.