



Survival Coalition

of Wisconsin Disability Organizations

P.O. Box 7222, Madison, Wisconsin 53707

July 24, 2015

To: The Honorable Ron Johnson
Members, U.S. Senate Homeland Security Committee

From: Survival Coalition of Wisconsin Disability Organizations

Re: July 20th U.S. Senate Homeland Security Committee Hearing:
The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program

Our member organizations thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony related to our experiences with the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program and its enrollment of students with disabilities.

The Survival Coalition has consistently requested a pause in the expansion of voucher programs in Wisconsin as we remain concerned about the capacity to adequately serve students with disabilities and the lack of requirement to do so under the law.

While the July 20th hearing testimony documented how some schools are serving students with disabilities, available data demonstrates that the MPCP voucher program overall serves very few children with disabilities, resulting in a growing percentage of students with disabilities in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), typically those with more severe disabilities. In 2012-13, nearly 25 percent of students who returned to the Milwaukee public schools from voucher schools -- 109 of 420 students -- were students with disabilities. Voucher program data verifies that less than 1.5% of voucher schools' students have documented disabilities, compared with an MPS average of just under 20%. Parents of students with cognitive and behavior disabilities have reported they are excluded from voucher schools because of a lack of appropriate services. A recent peer-reviewed article examining the MPCP indicated inadequate handling of the special needs of students was the second most common reason (11% of respondents) for students leaving MPCP.¹ This finding should not be ignored.

We request your further review, in coordination with the U.S. Department of Justice, of the MPCP due to claims by parents of discrimination as documented in a complaint filed by Disability Rights Wisconsin and the ACLU in June 2011. We ask for your support as the U.S. Department of Justice continues to investigate these claims and makes recommendations to improve the system to address concerns.

¹ Cowen, Josh; Fleming, David; Witte, John and Patrick J. Wolf. 2012. "Going Public: Who Leaves a Large, Longstanding, and Widely Available Urban Voucher Program?" American Educational Research Journal (April 2012) (pp. 231-256). <http://aer.sagepub.com/content/49/2/231>

Allegations of discrimination under federal law should be taken seriously and investigated to the fullest extent. Discriminatory practices, particularly when public funding is involved, should be addressed and schools provided with appropriate information and support to correct problems so that all students, including those with disabilities, can have equal access to this publicly funded program.

We also suggest that it is essential to collect more consistent data about students with disabilities attending voucher programs. Definitions of students must be consistent across educational settings receiving public funding so that parents can compare educational outcomes of students who have similar disabilities. This change will not only help parents to make the best informed choices for their child, but all schools will benefit from a more accurate and objective comparison.

Ultimately all parents want access to high quality education options for their child with a disability. However, for students with disabilities, additional information, protections and scrutiny must be in place to ensure their success. Thank you for your assistance in assuring the civil rights of our students with disabilities.

For additional information contact Survival Co-Chairs:

Maureen Ryan, moryan@charter.net; (608) 444-3842;
Beth Swedeen, beth.swedeen@wisconsin.gov; (608) 266-1166;
Kristin M. Kerschensteiner, kitk@drwi.org; (608) 267-0214