



# Survival Coalition

of Wisconsin Disability Organizations

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From: The Survival Coalition of Wisconsin Disability Organizations

## **Special Education Vouchers Lead to Rampant Fraud and Abuse in Florida: This it Not What we Want for Wisconsin Students with Disabilities**

A Florida investigation into fraud and abuse released yesterday serves as a warning to the Legislature as they plan to push through special education vouchers in Wisconsin. Disability advocates say a plan to create vouchers for students with disabilities in Wisconsin is flawed on many levels, but has now risen to a level of crisis concern for families.

This week Joint Finance Committee Co-Chair, Representative Robin Vos [announced in a Racine newspaper](#) that in the fall he would push to introduce a bill for special education vouchers modeled after a Florida program. A bill, AB 110, has already received a hearing in the Assembly and legislators are working on a similar measure in the Senate. Yesterday [a Florida investigation](#) into that government subsidized program revealed rampant fraud and abuse.

While many Wisconsin legislators have called Florida's program, known as the McKay Scholarship, "successful", the Miami New Times article calls the special education voucher system "a perverse science experiment, using disabled school kids as lab rats and funded by nine figures in taxpayer cash." They say it doles out millions to anybody calling himself an educator and does not regulate or even visit campuses to see where the money is going. Several of the scholarship's Florida creators and supporters are quoted as having reservations about how the program has evolved and the impact on students.

Both Wisconsin's pending voucher proposals and the Florida model lack teeth in provisions which disability advocates say are essential for students with disabilities including:

- Requirements for certified special educators
- Requirements for an established curriculum
- Requirements for appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities.

Disability advocates warn that the omission of these crucial elements left the door wide open for fraud in the Florida model and would likely be areas for abuse in Wisconsin.

Current voucher proposals on the table in Wisconsin, which have been crafted without the support of any established statewide disability organization, do not include formal oversight or accountability to families or students. There is no guarantee that a child will receive the required and individualized services they have a right to in the public school. At the same time, voucher programs are expected to drain resources from already strapped public schools which are trying to serve special education students with research-based practices.

In Florida, the model for Wisconsin's legislation, the Department of Education has investigated 38 schools suspected of fraud. In 25 cases, the allegations have been substantiated. The article states, "The thieving schools across the state received, or in many cases are still receiving, McKay money totaling \$49.3 million."

Wisconsin bill sponsors say they want to give Wisconsin families of students with disabilities choices. The Florida model of special education vouchers is not a model we want for our children in Wisconsin. We urge the legislature to step back from this proposal and do what's right for all students with disabilities in Wisconsin. Legislators must invest in research-based practices and critical oversight provisions that offer the protections and accountability that students with disabilities require and that taxpayers deserve.

The Survival Coalition is comprised of over 40 statewide groups representing people with all disabilities and all ages, their family members, advocates and providers of disability services. For over 20 years Survival has been at the forefront of promoting cost effective, community-based services and supports for people with disabilities.

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