



of Wisconsin Disability Organizations

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**Survival Coalition Asks Legislators to Focus on Quality Improvement in Education of Students with Disabilities, Not Creation of a Special Needs Voucher System**

The Survival Coalition of Wisconsin Disability Organizations is surprised to see another Special Needs Voucher proposal emerge in the Legislature today, despite the fact that no statewide disability organization supports the measure as a means to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. Similar proposals have not succeeded in passing the Legislature although they have been introduced several times since 2011.

“Our Coalition members have agreed that six essential criteria must be met in any proposal that the Legislature considers which creates a separate Special Needs Voucher/Scholarship program,” says Survival Coalition Co-Chair, Maureen Ryan. “These criteria will prevent fraud and protect children's rights.”

The six criteria include

- a. The special needs voucher is only available to low income families (same level as other voucher programs).
- b. The voucher prohibits tuition charges that exceed the voucher amount.
- c. The voucher does not diminish funding for public schools provision of special education or general education.
- d. The voucher ensures that special educators and related services staff (e.g., physical, occupational and speech therapists) will be at any voucher schools which accept such students and that they will implement the child's IEP.
- e. There must be sufficient oversight in place to hold schools which participate in any such program accountable for implementation of childrens' IEPs.
- f. Children who are eligible for such programs must be re-evaluated at least every 3 years to determine if they still meet Wisconsin special education eligibility criteria. If they are no longer eligible for special education, they will not continue to receive a special needs scholarship.

“Previous Special Needs Scholarships proposals would have diverted limited state resources to private schools that have no responsibility for providing specific services and supports, no responsibility for reporting outcomes, and no obligation to keep the student enrolled,” says Kit Kerschensteiner, Survival Coalition Co-Chair. “This is at the core of our opposition.”

The Coalition remains concerned about reports coming from other states with similar programs for students with disabilities. “Other states have experienced private schools disenrolling the student after a few weeks or months, but keeping the student’s voucher money,” says Beth Swedeen, Survival Coalition Co-Chair. “We do not have assurances that will not happen here.”

Additionally, in other states, private schools have been unwilling or unable to accept students with a wide array of disabilities, resulting in the “cherry-picking” of those students who are less costly to educate. Private schools do not have to develop legally protected educational plans for students, and parental protections ensured by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) do not apply.

The Coalition proposes working together on fixes for the current open enrollment system as a means to increase families’ access to quality special education. Specifically, repealing the undue financial burden exemption for families who are experiencing difficulties in their home public school districts would be a more appropriate way to create authentic school choice for families who believe their child is not making adequate progress and/or that the IEP is inadequate or not being implemented effectively. Providing families with choices that allow them to remain in a school system that is both accountable for outcomes and must adhere to federal law affording protections to students and their families is the best solution.

*Survival Coalition is comprised of more than 30 statewide disability organizations that advocate and support policies and practices that lead to the full inclusion, participation, and contribution of people living with disability.*

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*Survival Coalition Issue Teams: education, employment, housing, long term care for Adults, long term care for children, mental health, transportation, workforce, voting, Medicaid and health care.*

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