

**Summary of  
Government Accountability Office Report:  
*Private School Choice Programs Are Growing and Can Complicate Providing Certain  
Federally Funded Services to Eligible Students***

**General Information about the Study:**

- At the request of Reps Mark Pocan (D- WI), Marcia Fudge (D-OH), and Gwen Moore (D-WI), the GAO examined participation in private school choice programs across the country. The study surveyed 20 voucher programs and 5 ESA programs (although only two were operational at the time of the study) across the country and conducted site visits and interview with school district and private school officials in programs in 4 states: Ohio, Wisconsin, Arizona, and Indiana. The programs in those four states represent half of all private school choice programs, and around 2/3 of participating students nationwide.
- The Study found that “private school choice programs are growing and can complicate certain federally funded services to eligible students.”
- The GAO recommends “the Secretary of Education should incorporate information about providing equitable services in the context of private school choice programs into guidance.”

**Other Important Findings:**

- **The Voucher Programs Took Funds Away from Public Schools:** Voucher programs are funded in a variety of ways. In some cases, the money used to fund voucher programs comes directly from the public school funding stream: In Milwaukee’s Parental Choice Program, one-third of the program’s funding came from state funds that would have directly funded the public school district for the 2014-15 school year.
- **The Voucher Programs Lacked Important Data About Students:** It’s difficult to gather data on voucher students across the states because many programs do not collect demographic information on students. Almost half of the voucher programs that serve students with disabilities did not collect information on the type of disability each student had. Among all other voucher programs, only five collected and reported information on students’ family incomes, just two of the programs collected and reported information on English Learners, and still other programs failed to report information on students’ gender, race, and ethnicity. Information is also limited on which students accept vouchers but leave the voucher program and why. Only six of the 20 voucher programs reported this data.
- **Most Private Schools Charged Tuition Above and Beyond the Value of the Voucher:** Thirteen out of the 20 voucher programs and both operational ESA programs surveyed do not place a cap on private school tuition, meaning that a voucher may not cover the actual cost of attending private schools in the state.
- **Schools Accepting Vouchers and ESA Funds Can Pick And Choose Students:** Only four programs out of the 20 voucher programs and both operational ESA programs required private voucher schools to accept all students with vouchers (if there was space); the other programs allowed private schools to deny students for admission for many reasons including disciplinary history, academic achievement,

and religious affiliation. Specifically, the GAO found that officials from many of the schools they interviewed considered applicant's disciplinary history and academic achievement.

- **Most Schools Accepting Vouchers Were Religious Schools:** Only four of the 20 voucher programs surveyed collected information on schools' religious affiliation, but of those programs 69-88% of voucher schools were religious. One school GAO spoke with required all students in fourth grade and above to agree to follow a list of religious principles when applying to the school.

#### **Vouchers' Impact on Students with Disabilities:**

- **Students Who Use Vouchers Lose Rights:** Students who are eligible for additional services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are eligible to receive those services in private schools. However, students who are parentally placed in a private school through a voucher program are not entitled to the same special education services that students receive through IDEA in the public schools. For voucher students, there is no individual right to receive special education services in private schools. Instead, it is up to the school districts to decide which IDEA services it wants to provide.
- **Confusion Leads To Students Being Denied Services:** Many voucher students entitled to receive some IDEA services in private schools do not receive these services merely because the district and school officials are confused on whether and how to provide them.
- **Special Education Services Are Provided Inconsistently:** Among the four states (Ohio, Wisconsin, Arizona, and Indiana), voucher students in urban areas are less likely to receive IDEA services than those in rural or suburban areas. In Ohio and Wisconsin, under 30% of students in urban areas receive IDEA services.

#### **Vouchers' Impact on Low-Income Students:**

- **Many Voucher Students Lose Access to Equitable Services Under Title I:** Students from areas of high concentrations of poverty are entitled to additional services under Title I of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Students eligible for Title I funds in private schools are also entitled to receive services that are equitable to those they would have received in public schools (equitable services). However, many voucher students do not receive these services.
  - **Some Schools Opt Out:** School districts and private schools have flexibility in how they distribute Title I funds to provide equitable services, and they can choose not to provide any of the services at all. Three private schools visited by GAO opted out of providing Title I equitable services, citing reasons such as the hassle of the "administrative burden."
  - **Confusion Leads to a Loss of Services in Some Schools:** In addition to opting out of Title I funds, private schools – especially new private schools that spring up after a voucher program is created – are often not aware that they are entitled to receive Title I funds.

#### **Vouchers' Impact on Students in Public Schools:**

- **Vouchers Drain Federal Funds from Students in Public Schools:** More voucher and ESA programs across the country mean that more federal IDEA and Title I funds must be dispersed to private schools across districts to provide services to students with disabilities and students from low-income areas. This can lead to fewer services for eligible students who remain in the public schools. It also places a strain on teachers and tutors who must travel from school to school.



The **National Coalition for Public Education** comprises more than 50 education, civic, civil rights, and religious organizations devoted to the support of public schools. Founded in 1978, NCPE opposes the funneling of public money to private and religious schools through such mechanisms as tuition tax credits and vouchers.