

**Summary of the Government Accountability Office Report**  
**Private School Choice: Federal Actions Needed to Ensure Parents are Notified About Changes in Rights for Students with Disabilities**

*At the request of Reps Mark Pocan (D- WI), Marcia Fudge (D-OH), and Gwen Moore (D-WI), the GAO examined 27 voucher and education savings account (ESA) programs across the country for the 2016-17 school year, focusing on accountability and information about rights for students with disabilities.*

**General Conclusions:** Overall, private school voucher programs lack consistency in their accountability mechanisms and do not provide sufficient information to the public. In particular, private school voucher programs fail to provide necessary or accurate information to parents of students with disabilities about the rights those students forfeit by enrolling at a private voucher school.

**GAO Recommendations:** Congress should amend IDEA to require states to notify parents of changes to special education rights when they enroll a child in a school voucher program. Otherwise, states will be unlikely to provide parents with consistent and accurate information about IDEA changes that affect some of our nation's most vulnerable children.

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## Private School Voucher Programs Lack Adequate Accountability Measures

**Few private school voucher programs require academic accountability measures.** One-third of the programs examined had no academic testing requirement; one-third of the programs did not require any specific teacher credentials or qualifications; and only one-third of programs require schools to report test scores publicly.

**Fiscal accountability controls for voucher programs are also a common weakness.** Less than one-third of programs—which represented fewer than a quarter of all students participating in voucher and ESA programs in school year 2016-17—require participating schools to provide annual audits to demonstrate they appropriately accounted for the receipt of state funds.

**The programs lack oversight mechanisms.** Examples from interviews with administrators from the largest voucher programs in Arizona, Florida, Indiana, Ohio, and Wisconsin – collectively serving over two-thirds of all students in voucher programs –include:

- “[O]fficials in one program told us they received a number of complaints about a lack of adult supervision at a participating private school and asked local Child Protective Services to intervene.”
- “[P]rogram officials in one state said they have limited resources to independently verify the information submitted by schools in their annual applications because processing voucher payments takes priority.”
- “Program officials in another state said financial constraints prevented them from visiting all of the schools that were flagged for not complying with program requirements last year.”
- “[O]fficials in one program described being concerned that a particular school’s buildings were unsafe. However, they said that the choice program’s statute does not contain requirements related to the safety of participating schools, and the city must issue a safety notice before program staff could remove the school from the program.”

## Private School Voucher Programs Provide Insufficient Information to the Public

**Without sufficient information, families cannot make informed decisions about enrolling in a voucher program.** GAO reviewed the school directories and websites that each voucher program makes available to prospective families and found that of the 27 programs, only 6 directories provided information on school accreditation, 5 directories provided data on student race and ethnicity data, 4 directories provided information on graduation rates, and 10 programs provided guidelines to parents on how to choose a school.

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## Private School Voucher Programs and Voucher Schools Fail to Notify Parents of Students with Disabilities that They Are Forfeiting Rights and Protections

**Few parents of children with disabilities are given accurate information about the federal and state protections they are losing when they choose to enroll in a private school voucher program.** Neither IDEA nor the Department of Education's regulations require that parents be informed about their child's change in rights or protections when they enroll in a voucher program. In fact, one-third of all 27 programs do not provide any information to parents about the loss of procedural safeguards and due process protections under IDEA.

**Voucher programs specifically designed for students with disabilities fail to provide necessary information about changes in their rights.**

- 83 percent of students enrolled in a disability voucher program were in a program that provided either no information or inaccurate information about changes in IDEA rights.
- Only 5 percent of the disability voucher programs provided parents with information about whether teachers were trained to serve students with disabilities.
- Only 10 percent of disability voucher program administrators provided inaccurate or misleading information to parents about receiving special education services delivered by a public school, even though they were not eligible.

**Private schools accepting vouchers fail to accurately inform parents about the types of services they provide students with disabilities.** According to GAO, the "lack of information can result in parents making incorrect assumptions about private school choice programs and schools."

- Only 9 to 21 percent of the websites of private schools with voucher programs for students with disabilities provided information about which types of students with disabilities they can serve.
- Less than 10 percent of private school websites stated whether they exclusively served students with disabilities or were open to all students.
- No more than 53 percent of private schools in voucher programs designed for students with disabilities provided disability-related information on their websites.

**Parents reported feeling that they lacked the information necessary to make an informed decision.**

- Another family said "they were surprised to learn that teachers providing special education services to their child were not trained to provide those services."
- One parent described "changing schools because they learned aspects of their child's disability could not be accommodated only after enrolling their child in a 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.

## GAO's Previous Reports Point to a Pattern of Failures among Private School Voucher Programs

A [2016 study](#) found that private school voucher programs lead to complications in providing special education services to eligible students – either provided inconsistently or denied altogether.

- The study looked at 25 voucher programs (20 traditional voucher and 5 education savings account programs) across the country and found that these voucher programs significantly complicated the receipt of federal funding for programs in public schools in those states. It found that voucher programs harmed students with disabilities by denying them their rights under IDEA, by failing to provide equitable services, and by providing IDEA services inconsistently across school districts. The study also found that voucher programs harmed students from low-income families because many private voucher schools failed to provide equitable Title I services to eligible students.

[2013](#) and [2007](#) studies of the DC voucher program found the program to be severely lacking in administration, oversight, and quality controls.

- The 2013 study looked at the administration of the DC voucher program and found significant weaknesses in administration and oversight. Among the problems the study identified: it failed to give prospective families enough information to make informed decisions, it did not provide effective oversight to voucher schools, its database was outdated and full of inaccuracies, it lacked financial accountability, and it failed to ensure voucher schools complied with accreditation standards.
- The 2007 study found that the DC voucher program lacked accountability and was missing the systems, procedures, and internal controls necessary to implement the program effectively. Among its many problems: the program administrator provided parents incomplete and inaccurate information about voucher schools. The study also found that schools in the voucher program were of poor quality and some lacked even basic requirements such as certificates of occupancy.



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