

Stop Special Needs Vouchers: Special Needs Voucher expansion proposal once again tells families of students with disabilities - your voices don't matter

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Madison, WI - It's *déjà vu* all over again for families of students with disabilities who have been doing their best for years to raise their voices in opposition to special needs vouchers. In May 2015, a post-midnight vote introduced a special needs voucher program into the state budget with no opportunity for public feedback. Now, on September 6 of 2017, the Joint Finance Committee introduced and passed a major expansion to the program, once again without opportunity for families to see the proposal and offer their testimony.

The families of Stop Special Needs Vouchers have repeatedly stressed their concerns about the lack of rights and protections for students with disabilities in private voucher schools, and the increasing drain on funding for the public schools that must accept and educate students of all abilities.

Kelli Simpkins, whose 14-year-old son Mickey has an IEP in the Madison school district, found herself with similar objections to the voucher expansion that she had to the 2015 early-morning vote that created the program. "We keep hearing that special needs vouchers are all about trusting the parents. If that's the case, why are we not trusted to testify when the legislature considers big policy changes for students with disabilities?" she asked. "The changes to the special needs vouchers

program are expected to funnel over three million dollars from the public schools into unaccountable private schools that don't even have to accept our kids! Surely we ought to have a chance to weigh in on this?"

Nancy Gapinski, whose 10-year old son Ben has an IEP in the Glendale-River Hills school district, wondered at the changing rationale for special needs vouchers that the new policy changes revealed. "My concerns with the special needs vouchers haven't changed," she said. "I still believe that increased funding for special education should go to the public schools, where the vast majority of children with disabilities are educated and where the rights and protections of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act apply. We were told two years ago that the special needs vouchers were needed due to students with disabilities being denied open enrollment between public school districts, and now we're being told that open enrollment should play no part in special needs voucher enrollment. Is anyone even listening to what's being said?"

Families' objections to special needs voucher expansion include not only the lack of rights and protection in voucher schools and the loss of resources for students in public schools, but also the complete lack of evidence that voucher schools offer any better outcomes for students with disabilities.

What was true in 2015 is still true today: special needs voucher policy changes do not belong in the state budget.

For more information on Stop Special Needs Vouchers, a parent-led statewide grassroots group, see:

Facebook page — <https://www.facebook.com/StopSpecialNeedsVouchers>

Web site — <http://www.stopspecialneeds vouchers.org>