

# Wisconsin Family Ties: Special needs voucher expansion: State budgeting by stealth

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Madison, WI – On the final day of state budget deliberations, and months after public hearing opportunities on the state budget have passed, the Joint Finance Committee voted along party lines Wednesday to use the budget to significantly expand Wisconsin's Special Needs Scholarship Program. The controversial voucher program, which was opposed by parents and disability organizations across Wisconsin, was enacted in the 2015/17 state budget after a late-night Joint Finance Committee vote on a surprise proposal, also without a public hearing. By eliminating various enrollment requirements, it is estimated that 250 more students than currently projected could receive special needs vouchers in the 2018-19 school year, many of them already in private schools, at a cost of \$3.1 million in aid reduction to the students' districts of residence.

The motion eliminated the requirement for a student to have been denied open enrollment into a nonresident school district, despite the 2015 argument that open enrollment denials were a primary reason for creating the program. The motion also eliminated the requirement that a child be enrolled in a public school in Wisconsin for the entire school year before applying for the program, making more current private school students eligible for the vouchers. In a further modification that had never before been publicly proposed, the motion restructured the special needs voucher funding to be based on a private school's actual costs, if those costs are higher than the current voucher amount. However, if the costs are lower, the school would continue to receive the current voucher amount and pocket the difference. Since the first actual-cost reimbursements would not happen until the 2019/20

school year, no fiscal estimate was offered.

According to Hugh Davis, Wisconsin Family Ties executive director, “This special needs voucher expansion is the worst of two worlds: the policy is bad, and the process is appalling. Whatever happened to citizen participation in government? When do parents get to review and respond to policies that funnel taxpayer dollars into private schools that are not required to protect the rights of students with disabilities?”

A student who takes a special needs voucher forfeits a host of federal rights and protections under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Among the protections lost are those regarding school disciplinary practices, including the right to have disability taken into account when expulsion is being considered. In contrast, special needs voucher schools are not even required to have suspension or expulsion policies.

Davis also pointed out, “State funding for special education categorical aid in the public schools has been stagnant for a generation, with a decade worth of frozen budgets. We have been told on the one hand that Wisconsin cannot afford to properly fund our students in the public schools, while the legislature, without discussion, funds a competing education system with far less accountability to the taxpayers who will be footing the bill.”

Wisconsin Family Ties calls upon the legislature and Governor Walker to reject these late-breaking stealth-expansions to the special needs voucher program.