

Survival Coalition: Statement in opposition to (or regarding) AB970 & AB966

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The Survival Coalition of Wisconsin Disability Organizations, a cross-disability coalition of more than 20 state and local organizations and groups, has significant concerns about two of the bills that are before the Assembly Committee on Education on Wednesday February 16. AB970 would remove existing income limits and participation limits on Wisconsin's voucher programs; AB966 would partition the Milwaukee Public School District into four to eight smaller districts. Both of these bills would be disproportionately harmful for students with disabilities.

Students with disabilities have federal rights to a free, appropriate public education, but those rights only apply in public schools. AB970, which proposes an immense expansion of the voucher programs, would funnel scarce funding resources away from the public schools where those rights apply, and into private schools that are not bound by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). We know from past decades of experience in Milwaukee that the unbridled expansion of vouchers tends to concentrate the students with the greatest disability-related challenges into public schools, while simultaneously cutting into the funding that supports them. Public schools remain the only schools in Wisconsin that are required to enroll and educate students of all abilities. To support students with disabilities to get the necessary education to lead a full and participatory life in communities across our state, Wisconsin should be supporting public schools rather than expanding voucher programs. AB970 does the opposite.

AB966, with its proposal to split the Milwaukee public schools into multiple districts, would add an additional layer of disproportional impact for students with disabilities, given that 19.6% of MPS students have disabilities while the statewide

percentage is only 14.2%. The bill leaves undefined what would happen to a student who attends an MPS school outside their new home-district lines after the districts are drawn, but none of the possibilities are good: either undergoing the disruption of being forced to change schools, or the uncertainty and bureaucracy of being suddenly open-enrolled across district lines. In addition, the forcible split would reduce the placement opportunities that are currently available for students with disabilities across the entire city. The new subdivided districts would either incur additional expense in recreating those opportunities or succumb to financial pressure and fail to offer them at all. A proposal this sweeping should involve a robust stakeholder process, and the lack of that input leaves this bill replete with unintended consequences, particularly for students with disabilities.

The Survival Coalition opposes both AB970 & AB966.
Sincerely,

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