
To: Members of the Joint Committee on Finance

CC: Gov. Scott Walker, Rep. Robin Vos, Sen. Scott Fitzgerald

From: Autism Society of South Central Wisconsin
Autism Society of Southeastern Wisconsin
Autism Society of Wisconsin
Citizen Advocates for Public Education, Lake Mills
Community Advocates for Public Education, Middleton-Cross Plains
Disability Rights Wisconsin
Mental Health America of Wisconsin
NAMI Wisconsin
Parents for Public Schools of Milwaukee
Saint Croix Valley Friends of Public Education
School Funding Reform for Wisconsin, Stevens Point
Stop Special Needs Vouchers
Support Sun Prairie Schools
Survival Coalition of Wisconsin Disability Organizations
The Arc of Wisconsin
Wisconsin Alliance for Excellent Schools
Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities
Wisconsin Council of Administrators of Special Services
Wisconsin Council of the Blind & Visually Impaired
Wisconsin Family Ties

Date: July 31, 2017

RE: Opposing Special Needs Scholarship Expansion Proposals

We are writing on behalf of our organizations that represent and support students, families, and public schools, to request that the Joint Finance Committee decline to take up the expansions to the Special Needs Scholarship Program that appear in the July 18 Senate budget proposal.

We support quality, inclusive public education for students with disabilities, in context of the full rights and protections afforded by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Under the IDEA, Wisconsin students with disabilities have the right to a free, appropriate public education, including the right to a legally-enforceable Individualized Education Program (IEP).

However, when a student with disabilities attends a private school using taxpayer funding, such as the private schools in the Special Needs Scholarship Program, he or she must relinquish the rights and protections of the IDEA. This creates risk for the students and families who take special needs

vouchers, in addition to the inherent risk in the fact that special needs vouchers are not, and have never been, a research-based solution for the educational issues faced by students with disabilities and their families.

Meanwhile, special education in the public schools, which are required to serve all students with disabilities under the IDEA, has been consistently underfunded on both the state and federal level. Any expansion of the Special Needs Scholarship Program further compounds the concern, diverting funding to private schools and leaving students in the public schools with lessened overall support.

As Wisconsin disability and education stakeholders, we oppose the expansions of the Special Needs Scholarship Program proposed in the July 18 Senate budget proposal:

- Eliminating the prior-year open enrollment requirement for the special needs scholarship program
- Eliminating the prior-year public school enrollment requirement for entering the special needs scholarship program
- For students determined to be eligible for special education services, eliminating the requirement that a student have an IEP at a public school
- Adding a summer school payment component to the special needs scholarship program funding
- Authorizing private schools in the special needs scholarship program to set up virtual education programs, in the absence of research evidence supporting such interventions

Taken together, these expansions are estimated to result in an additional aid reduction to public schools of \$1,865,100 beyond that which would occur under current law, an amount that exceeds the entire total aid reduction from the 2016/17 school year.

We request that the Joint Finance Committee join us in opposing the detrimental proposed expansion of the Special Needs Scholarship Program.