

FAQs

Can school choice help special-education students?

Yes. Providing school choice to special-education students allows families unhappy with their assigned public school to find a program that meets their child's individual needs.

As of 2010, after ten years of operation, Florida's McKay program has more than 20,000 participating students, which is the largest program of its kind in the country.

Private schools are not highly selective, and offer better educational opportunities for students who are difficult to teach, including students with disabilities. They are often better equipped to handle students with disabilities or other challenging students than public schools.

Myth: Private Schools Exclude Disadvantaged Students

Many people are under the impression that private schools are highly selective in accepting students. Private schools are widely thought to weed out the less desirable students and select only the cream of the crop. Because of this perception, many are concerned that vouchers will "cream-skim" the best students from public schools, leaving them with the burden of teaching the more difficult students.

Students with disabilities present a particular area of concern. There is a widespread perception that private schools do not serve disabled students. Public schools maintain a large and costly bureaucracy whose purpose is to provide special education services, but this sort of administrative infrastructure is not as visible in private schools. As a result, many people believe that private schools do not offer special education services.

Facts: Private Schools Are Not Highly Selective

Private schools exist to serve as many students as they can. That's

their mission; helping students is what they were created to do. Also, private schools benefit when they maximize their enrollments. The available evidence does not support the perception that private schools are highly selective in admissions; it points to the conclusion that private schools seek a broad student base.

In particular, private schools serve disabled students better than public schools. While private schools do not usually have large and expensive special education bureaucracies, they do provide special education services. The empirical evidence indicates that private schools have a better track record of providing necessary special education services than the public school special education system does.

Evidence: Studies Refute Exclusion in Private Schools

The available evidence indicates that private schools are not highly selective. The best empirical study on this question compared students participating in voucher programs in New York, Washington, D.C. and Dayton to representative samples of the general population. It found that

there were no important differences between voucher applicants and the general population on a variety of demographic and academic factors. Evaluations of voucher programs in Charlotte and San Antonio showed similar results.¹

Moreover, some school choice programs, like the Milwaukee voucher program, require every participating private school to accept all voucher students. If the number of applicants exceeds the number of available slots at a school, then students are chosen by random lottery. Yet these programs with "anti-cream-skimming" provisions have a consistent track record of success.²

Meanwhile, contrary to widespread perception, public schools do not serve all students. Public high schools expel approximately 1 percent of their students each year. Another 0.6 percent of public high school students are placed in specialized schools, so they are not served by their neighborhood public schools.³ Additionally, 1.5 percent of all disabled students in public schools are contracted out to private schools that can better handle their special needs.⁴

The evidence also indicates that private schools do a better job of serving disabled students than public schools. Over 25,000 students participate in voucher programs exclusively serving disabled students in Florida, Georgia, Ohio and Utah. And that figure doesn't include disabled students participating in other school choice programs.

Though evaluating the academic achievement of disabled students is problematic, at least one study has compared special education services in public and private schools. A 2003 study by Jay Greene and Greg Forster compared the services participants received in each of the two institutions. This empirical evaluation of Florida's McKay voucher program, which allows any disabled student in public school to receive vouchers to attend private school, learned

that parents reported dramatically higher rates of satisfaction with their children's academic progress as well as fewer instances of victimization and behavior problems in private schools than public schools. Other key findings were:

- 93 percent of McKay participants are satisfied with their McKay schools, while only 33 percent were similarly satisfied with their public schools.
- Only 30 percent of current participants say they received all services required under federal law from their previous public schools, while 86 percent say their McKay schools provide all the services they promised to provide.
- 47 percent of participants were bothered often and 25 percent were physically assaulted at their previous public schools because of their disabilities, compared to 5 percent

bothered often and 6 percent assaulted in McKay schools.

- More than 90 percent of former McKay participants who have left the program said the McKay program should continue to be available for those who wish to use it.

Even families that no longer participated in voucher programs noted that private schools served them better than public schools. Over 90 percent said that the program should continue to serve other families, even though they were no longer using it themselves.⁵

School choice policies for special education allow parents to find a school that matches their child's individual needs. The survey evidence shows that disabled students in school choice programs are getting better accommodations and services.

¹ William Howell and Paul Peterson, *The Education Gap: Vouchers and Urban Schools*, second edition, Brookings Institution, 2006, p. 61-65. For further evidence on this issue see Jay Greene, Greg Forster and Marcus Winters, *Education Myths*, Rowman and Littlefield, 2005, p. 162-164.

² See the Foundation for Educational Choice research review "Vouchers Deliver a Better Education" for more information.

³ Greene, Forster and Winters, *Education Myths*, p. 163-164.

⁴ Jay Greene and Marcus Winters, "Debunking a Special Education Myth," *Education Next*, spring 2007.

⁵ Jay Greene and Greg Forster, "Vouchers for Special Education Students: An Evaluation of Florida's McKay Scholarship Program," Manhattan Institute, June 2003.