



 [Click to Print](#)

Absence of oversight

A voucher program makes sense for students with autism. Now the state must ensure that the program works

Published: October 20, 2010 - 02:30 AM

Medical surveys in recent years show sharp increases in the number of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders. In Ohio, the number has soared from 1,046 children in 1998 to nearly 13,500 in 2009. The demand has risen accordingly for services to address the range of developmental problems and needs for those affected.

Few families and schools have the expertise to provide the specialized services that are appropriate for each student. It should not surprise that parents often are frustrated by the limited capacity of their public schools to tend to the individual needs of students diagnosed with autistic disorders.

The basis for Ohio's Autism Scholarship Program, authorized in 2003, was to maintain focus on appropriate educational services for this group of students. The autism voucher program is a necessary option. It lends much needed flexibility to Ohio's school system for children whose disabilities as yet are not well understood. For parents struggling to cope with autism, the program offers the essential funding to search out the private services best for their children.

Unfortunately, recognizing the critical value of the program is not to say it is reaching maximum effectiveness, or even close. As reported Sunday by John Higgins, a Beacon Journal staff writer, there are problems that state officials must resolve quickly to raise the performance of the 7-year-old program.

The program pays up to \$20,000 a year for a student identified as autistic by the home school district. The district develops an Individualized Education Plan, IEP, which lists educational goals and services for the year and is agreed to by the parents. By law, the home school district is required to report on the student's progress and to develop and refine an annual plan based on progress, regardless where the student receives educational services.

In Akron and some districts, officials note that private providers often fail to submit required quarterly reports, making it difficult for the district to meet its accountability role to monitor student progress and develop follow-up plans. Another key source of concern involves the wide variations in expertise and quality among state-approved providers. A 2008 review by Policy Matters Ohio cited the minimal state oversight of providers. As disturbing, local officials contend that complaints to state officials about implementation problems go unresolved.

The voucher program is a crucial option for a group of students with few options for gaining an effective education. State officials owe it to them and to taxpayers to address the many problems and ensure the program lives up to its potential for making a difference in the lives of many students.

Find this article at:

<http://www.ohio.com/editorial/editorials/absence-of-oversight-1.194609>

 [Click to Print](#)

Copyright © 2011 Ohio.com