

# ANALYZING AUTISM VOUCHERS IN OHIO

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ohio's Autism Scholarship Program allows parents whose children are considered to have an autism spectrum disorder to use public funds of up to \$20,000 per year to purchase education or treatment at private schools or other approved facilities.

During fiscal year 2007, which ended June 30, approximately 734 children aged 3 to 21 were enrolled in the program for at least part of the year. To pay for the vouchers that year, the state deducted \$10,872,770 from state foundation funds flowing to the 209 Ohio school districts with residents enrolled in the program. The average voucher amount was just under \$15,000.

Families of all income levels are eligible and can choose from a list of providers approved by Ohio's education department. In October, that list included some 200 providers in 32 of Ohio's 88 counties.

### FINDINGS

For this project, we interviewed parents seeking the best education and services for their children, district officials who said the program drains needed resources, and private providers offering services ranging from all-day academic programs to speech therapy. We also consulted advocates with expertise in the education of children with autism. This study is timely because the Ohio legislature is working to create a voucher for all special needs children and Ohio's autism voucher is being viewed as a model for other states. Policy Matters Ohio found the following:

**Selective admission:** All but three of the 40 private schools or school-like providers with claims for payment in the first quarter of fiscal year 2008 have criteria that restrict or discourage enrollment. Only 15 accept children with more severe disabilities, while 14 charge fees above the voucher cap. Many require religious instruction, discouraging enrollment of eligible children. Only 100 of the 880 first-quarter claims were for school settings that did not exclude on the basis of one of these criteria.

**Majority of agencies don't offer school setting:** The 87 other providers with first-quarter claims – two-thirds of active providers – offered services such as tutoring or therapy that are not comparable to class time mandated in Ohio's public schools. Nearly 40 percent of first-quarter claims were made for these private providers that did not offer a classroom setting.

**Greater use by wealthier Ohioans:** Families from relatively affluent Ohio communities are using the autism voucher more than families from poorer communities, according to a district-by-district comparison of median resident income and deductions from state aid to pay for the vouchers.

**Few providers in rural areas:** Approved providers in the program are concentrated in Ohio's urban areas, excluding many Ohioans not within reasonable driving distance. Last year, 37 counties had no voucher participants, while districts in Ohio's three largest counties accounted for nearly half of all voucher spending, despite enrolling only a quarter of the state's public students.

**Oversight and accountability lacking:** The state provides minimal oversight of services. Parents are largely responsible for holding providers accountable for services which they, as private entities with no obligation to serve or enroll all children who apply, are not legally required to provide.

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**Voucher students in restrictive settings:** Fully 75 percent of first-quarter claims were made for providers created to primarily or exclusively serve disabled students. As a result, the program undercuts decades of advocacy for the inclusion of disabled children in the mainstream of education.

**Education guarantee:** Parents surrender the right to a free appropriate public education when using the voucher. Lack of oversight and contentious relationships between voucher providers and districts can weaken the protection ostensibly provided by a child's Individualized Education Program.

**Financial impact unclear:** Many factors influence the voucher's impact on public schools, including costs to educate autistic children and district property wealth. ODE maintains that only state funds are used for the voucher; district officials say the program drains local money from their coffers.

**Disconnect between costs, disability:** Children with more severe needs may be shut out of the program by the lack of a consistent relationship between costs for services and severity of disability. This disconnect also allows some providers to charge significantly higher tuition to voucher students than they charge non-disabled students. At least two private schools charge children the full \$20,000 covered by the voucher, almost five times the tuition the same schools charge non-disabled students.

**Parental satisfaction:** Despite the above issues, parents interviewed for this study using the voucher tended to express more satisfaction with services than parents in district schools.

As state policy, this program is problematic particularly because it excludes children based on severity of disability, on ability to pay costs above the voucher amount, and because of their religion. It is also failing, in many cases, to provide an environment that allows disabled children to interact with non-disabled peers. This type of exclusion clashes with the idea of a public education system that seeks to draw a diverse group of children to learn together and to begin to create a common civic culture.

For these reasons, Policy Matters considers the autism program a poor model for a broader special education voucher under consideration by the Ohio General Assembly; it is not a model that should be emulated by other states. At the same time, we recognize that many families depend on the voucher, and we do not advocate ending the program in a way that would disrupt their education.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Rather than supporting a system that exacerbates inequity, public resources should be directed toward strengthening services for all. To this end, Policy Matters recommends that policy makers:

- Create incentives to serve autistic children through collaboration among schools, other public agencies, regional service centers, higher education institutions and private providers;
- Create new opportunities for job-embedded professional development for teachers and aides who regularly work with children on the autism spectrum;
- Establish incentives for institutions of higher education to develop programs and curricula that lead to certification in the teaching of children with autism;

We recommend these concrete reforms to improve education for children with autism. Broader reforms include: ensuring that Ohio's special education funding formula for school-age children and unit funding for preschoolers are up-to-date and fully funded; and passing the bill currently before the Ohio legislature to prohibit health insurers from excluding coverage for autism spectrum disorders, as 19 other states have done with similar legislation.