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# POLICY MATTERS OHIO

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**Full report available at <http://www.policymattersohio.org/AnalyzingAutismVouchers.htm>**

## **Ohio's autism voucher excludes children based on ability, wealth, religious belief; New study finds concentration in metropolitan areas leaves rural areas unserved**

Just 40 of the 127 approved private providers that filed claims for payment under Ohio's autism voucher program in the first quarter of fiscal year 2008 offered a school setting. Of these 40, only three did not limit or discourage enrollment by at least one of three criteria: degree of disability, cost, or religious belief.

"Autism vouchers are used in ways that differ dramatically from what we expect from public schools," said Piet van Lier, report author and Policy Matters senior researcher. "They don't necessarily support a full day of education for all eligible children."

The autism voucher awards up to \$20,000 a year to parents of children with autism. Families can use this voucher, formally known as the Autism Scholarship Program, at private schools and agencies approved by the Ohio Department of Education.

There were nearly 50 times more public school children diagnosed as having autism in 2006 – 9,127 children – than just over a decade earlier in 1995.

Policy Matters conducted research to better understand who is using the voucher, what kind of services are provided to children with autism, who is providing the services and how the program affects school districts.

Among our findings:

- Twenty-five of the 40 private providers offering a school setting do not accept children with more severe disabilities;
- Fourteen of these 40 providers charge fees above the \$20,000 voucher cap, requiring families to pay extra costs out-of-pocket or choose another school;
- Eighteen require religious instruction or agreement with a statement of faith, discouraging the enrollment of otherwise eligible children;
- Ohio families from relatively affluent communities are using the voucher more than Ohioans from poorer communities;
- Approved providers in the program are concentrated in Ohio's urban areas. As a result, 37 counties had no voucher participants last year, 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;



- The state provides minimal oversight of voucher services. Families 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.

This study is particularly timely as the Ohio General Assembly is considering legislation to create a broader voucher available to all special-needs children. Policy Matters considers the autism program a poor model for any such effort.

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.

The study also found that, of the small group of parents interviewed, those using the program reported a higher degree of satisfaction with services their children are receiving than did parents whose children are enrolled in public schools.

Nevertheless, the direction of public funds to a program with such serious inequities is cause for concern.

“Rather than supporting a system that exacerbates inequity, public resources should be directed toward strengthening services for all,” said van Lier.

To this end, Policy Matters recommends that policy makers:

- Create incentives to serve autistic children through collaboration among schools, county boards of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, regional service centers, higher education institutions and private providers;
- Create new opportunities for job-embedded professional development for administrators, 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.

*Policy Matters Ohio is a non-profit, non-partisan Ohio-based research institute dedicated to promoting policies and programs that work for all. This study relies on data released by the Ohio Department of Education and extensive interviews with stakeholders in Ohio’s autism community.*

