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Testimony on the Autism Scholarship Program Senate Education Committee April 1, 2008

Good afternoon Chairwoman Padgett, Ranking Member Roberts and members of the Senate Education committee. I am Piet van Lier, a senior researcher at Policy Matters Ohio. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about Senate Bill 57, which would create the Special Education Scholarship Program.

Policy Matters recently released a study of the state's Autism Scholarship Program, and I believe our findings are relevant as the Senate considers creating a publicly funded voucher for all special needs children in Ohio.

For this study we spoke with parents of children with autism, both those using the voucher and those with children enrolled in public schools. We spoke with representatives of school districts whose residents are using the voucher as well as representatives of private providers in the program. We also consulted with advocates and experts knowledgeable about educating children with autism.

From the small sample of parents we interviewed, those using the voucher reported higher levels of satisfaction than those whose children remain in public schools. We also found reason for concern about the adequacy of services for children on the autism spectrum offered at many district schools.

Nevertheless, we do not see the voucher program as a solution to the challenges of educating children with autism in Ohio. Rather than improving services for all Ohio families, it has worsened existing inequities in Ohio's public system.

Selective admission

We found several areas of concern. First and foremost, the program as a whole excludes families based on three criteria: cost, severity of disability, and religious belief.

We requested and received data on claims made by private providers under the voucher program in the first quarter of fiscal year 2008. A review of the 127 providers with active first-quarter claims revealed that 40 were schools or centers that provided school-like settings. Of these 40 schools or centers, only three did not limit or discourage enrollment by at least one of the three criteria.

We found that 25 of the 40 providers offering a school setting did not accept children with more severe disabilities; 14 of these 40 charged fees above the \$20,000 voucher cap, requiring families to pay extra costs out-of-pocket or choose another school; and 18 provided a religious setting, or required religious instruction or agreement with a statement of faith, discouraging enrollment of otherwise eligible children. This is not an indictment of private schools that limit or discourage enrollment based on their mission, whether it be religious or focused on a certain kind of disability. Rather, this exclusivity raises concerns about the program as a whole. Policy Matters feels that public tax dollars are best used to strengthen, improve and expand services that are available to all.



Greater use by wealthier Ohioans

Our study also found that residents of Ohio's wealthiest districts use the voucher more than residents of poorer communities. In fiscal year 2007, voucher use in the state's wealthiest 10 percent of districts accounted for 35 percent of spending on the voucher program, while voucher use in the poorest 10 percent of districts accounted for only 7 percent of voucher spending. These two very different sets of Ohio districts enroll about the same number of students – 17 percent of all Ohio public students go to school in the wealthiest districts and 14 percent in the poorest – but residents of the wealthier communities are using the voucher at a rate five times that of their poorer counterparts.

Reasons for this disproportionately higher use by Ohioans in wealthier communities likely include cost – as I mentioned earlier, at least 14 of the 40 school-like providers charge more than the \$20,000 voucher limit for at least some of their services, leaving parents to pick up the difference. Lower-income parents also may have more difficulty taking advantage of home-based services offered by many voucher providers, since both parents are more likely to be working outside the home. Research also suggests that wealthier parents are more likely to be involved in their children's education, and are more likely to know about options like the autism voucher, and more likely to assertively advocate for their children.

Few providers in rural areas

We found that approved providers in the program are concentrated in Ohio's metropolitan areas, excluding Ohioans in rural areas who are not within reasonable driving distance. Last year, only 32 of Ohio's 88 counties had approved private providers within their boundaries; all but 10 providers were in Ohio's eight major metropolitan areas, defined as counties with urban centers (Cuyahoga, Franklin, Hamilton, Lucas, Mahoning, Montgomery, Summit, and Stark counties) and immediately surrounding counties. Despite this distribution of private providers, residents of 51 counties participated in the voucher program in fiscal year 2007.

37 Ohio counties had no resident children in the program.

At the same time, districts in Ohio's three largest counties – Cuyahoga, Franklin and Hamilton – accounted for nearly half of voucher spending but enroll only a quarter of Ohio's public school children. The \$8.2 million ODE deducted from foundation aid designated for districts in the 10 Ohio counties with the highest resident participation in the program represents 75 percent of all voucher spending. These are either counties where one of the state's eight large urban school districts is located, or adjacent suburban counties.

Parents from unserved counties in southeast Ohio who were interviewed for this study reported that no appropriate services are available outside of the public sector, with or without the voucher. This geographic disparity in the availability of services for Ohio's autistic children predates the voucher program, but the program's creation has not reduced this inequity, nor does it invest in the training of public school teachers who serve autistic children throughout the state.

Voucher students in more restrictive settings

Finally, we found that 75 percent of first-quarter claims made in fiscal year 2008 were made by providers created to primarily or exclusively serve disabled students and therefore unlikely to offer voucher students the opportunity for regular interaction with non-disabled peers. As a result, the program undercuts decades of advocacy for the inclusion of disabled children in the mainstream of education.

As you are aware, the "Least Restrictive Environment" provision of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires that children with disabilities be educated with non-disabled children to the maximum extent possible. Separate classes or schooling are to occur only when the



needs of disabled children can't be met in an inclusive environment, such as a regular education classroom or school, even with extra assistance.

The importance of this question is highlighted by the priority parents interviewed for this study placed on finding a setting that allows their children to practice social interaction with non-disabled peers who can model appropriate behaviors. Interviews also suggest, however, that many parents using the voucher are choosing more restrictive environments because they consider them more appropriate for their children.

Conclusion and recommendations

The autism voucher provides education and therapy options to about 5 percent of autistic children in Ohio's public schools. The voucher has allowed many families to access services they might not have otherwise been able to use. But the program's exclusivity and inequities overshadow benefits and undermine the idea of public schools as a place where a diverse group of children can learn together and begin to create a common civic culture.

For these reasons, Policy Matters does not view the program as sound education policy or as a good model for a broader special-needs voucher.

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

- **Create incentives to serve autistic children through collaboration among schools, boards of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (MR/DD), regional service centers, higher education institutions and private providers.** Examples of this type of collaboration, such as a partnership among three school districts, the education service center and Defiance College in northwest Ohio, already exist. These efforts are needed around the state, but would particularly benefit underserved rural areas.
- **Create new opportunities for professional development for teachers, aides and administrators who work with autistic children.** While public schools are arguably in the best position to deliver comprehensive education services to children on the autism spectrum, the lack of appropriate staff training is a serious shortcoming.
- **Establish incentives for institutions of higher education to develop programs and curricula that lead to certification in the teaching of children with autism.** Examples already exist. At Bowling Green State University, for example, efforts are underway to establish a master's level autism certificate which includes coursework and practical experience working with autistic children.
- **Establish criteria for data collection and reporting by private providers.** This would enable stronger oversight of the program and help policymakers better understand it.

The full version of this report, along with sources for all data used, can be found at www.policymattersohio.org.