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Vouchers and special education; Florida program makes the grade

April 29 by Marcus A. Winters and Jay P. Greene

The first of three.

Special education has grown dramatically over the last two decades and shows no signs of slowing. To date, about 14 percent of public school students have been diagnosed with a disability and receive special education services. In response to the disappointing educational experiences of these students, five states have now adopted voucher programs specifically tailored to disabled students. In a new study for the Manhattan Institute, we find evidence that Florida's special-education voucher program has improved the education that the public schools provide to the disabled students who remain in the public schools.

The first of its kind, the McKay program has offered vouchers to any disabled student in a Florida public school since 1999. Students can use these scholarships to pay tuition at any public or private school that is willing to admit them. The generous voucher is worth the lesser of the tuition at a private school or the amount that the public school would have spent on the child if he remained in public school. The McKay program has grown rapidly and with 18,273 participants is currently the largest school voucher program in the United States.

Most agree that vouchers probably help those students who use them. In fact, several randomized

field trials - the " gold standard " of social science research - have found that voucher students benefit when they use them to attend a private school of their choice. Rather, the debate over school choice for both regular enrollment and disabled students now centers on the impact it has on the public school system. Many people worry that vouchers harm public schools by depriving them of resources. Others contend that vouchers might improve public schools by forcing them to compete for students.

In the first quantitative evaluation of a voucher program for disabled students of which we are aware, we found that those students with relatively mild disabilities -the vast majority of special-education students in the state and across the nation - made larger academic gains when the number of private options nearby increased. Students with more severe disabilities were neither helped nor harmed by the addition of McKay scholarship-receiving private schools near their public school.

Students diagnosed with the mildest form of disability, known as a Specific Learning Disability (SLD), benefited the most from the availability of school choice. About 61 percent of students in special education have been identified as having an SLD, and many of these kids are not much different

from non-disabled students. We found that the average student with an SLD who remained in the public school system made an additional 0.05 and 0.07 standard deviation improvement in math and reading, respectively, than he would have made without the McKay program.

We cannot know for sure how exactly McKay improved public schools in Florida. It could be that public schools saw that their disabled students were leaving for private alternatives in search of a better education and responded to the challenge by improving their efforts. On the other hand, if special education students are as much of a financial burden for public schools as some argue, then as students leave public schools may be better able to utilize their resources to help the students who remain. From a policy perspective, the reason for the effect doesn't matter. What we know from our study is that rather than harming public schools, vouchers improve the education that they provide to their disabled students.

Our findings for special education vouchers are consistent with a growing body of research focused on school choice programs for regular education students. Despite conventional wisdom, several

previous studies indicate that school choice from voucher programs and charter schools actually improves the performance of public schools. Our new study is consistent with that literature and specifically shows that school choice has a positive effect even for those students who are the most challenging to educate.

Florida's McKay program combines two of the least commonly understood aspects of education policy: vouchers and special education. Although we still have a great deal to learn about these policies, the evidence from Florida suggests that vouchers improve the education that public schools offer to disabled kids. Expanding these programs across the nation could substantially improve the lives of the nation's nearly 7 million disabled students.

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