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## **New Report Reviews Rapidly Expanding School Voucher Programs in Wisconsin and Nationally**

The United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) [issued a report](#) on Monday analyzing the status of the nation's school voucher programs, including the third largest voucher program located in Wisconsin. The report reviews policies that impact students with disabilities in voucher programs and indicates how the rapidly expanding voucher system is affecting local public schools.

The GAO regularly audits and evaluates publicly funded programs on behalf of the U.S. Congress. In the report "[SCHOOL CHOICE: Private School Choice Programs Are Growing and Can Complicate Providing Certain Federally Funded Services to Eligible Students](#)" made public today, the GAO indicates that participation in private school choice programs has more than doubled nationally in the past 5 years.

Wisconsin, one of three states the GAO visited due to their high population of voucher students, currently operates four separate private voucher programs, including a new Special Needs Scholarship Program exclusively for students with disabilities beginning this fall. GAO reported that Wisconsin's voucher programs served nearly 30,000 students in the 2014-15 school year, representing 18% of all voucher students nationally.

"The report sheds light on policies that impact students with disabilities in Wisconsin and nationally," says Lisa Pugh, Public Policy Director. "States provide little oversight into voucher school policies once students are admitted and this can be problematic for students with disabilities. At Disability Rights Wisconsin, we have heard from parents of voucher students that these schools have disciplinary practices that do not take into account disability, or they cannot provide the educational accommodations necessary to teach the child, who is then effectively expelled from the school."

While Wisconsin's three voucher programs prohibit schools from disciplining students due to infractions like late payments, they do not restrict schools' disciplinary policies related to student behavior. Students with disabilities in public schools receive special protections and supports that require a process before a student is expelled for a reason related to their disability.

The report says there is limited information available about how many private school choice students remained in private schools after they are initially admitted, however, voucher schools interviewed in the report indicate that students with disabilities leave their schools because the student required more services than the school could provide.

The Milwaukee public school district currently reports high rates of students, particularly students with disabilities, returning to public school after initial admission to a voucher school.

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As voucher programs have expanded nationally public school districts interviewed for the report said they are experiencing additional administrative and financial strains. Specifically officials from two large public school districts reported that the increased demand for use of federal funds for services in private schools has affected the quality and amount of services they can provide for public school students.

"Federal grant programs require equitable educational services be provided to students in private schools. We are concerned that public school officials stated they had to eliminate needed services to children with disabilities because of required funding set aside for private voucher schools and that some voucher schools may discriminate through *de facto* exclusion of students with disabilities," says Attorney Daniel Idzikowski, the organization's Executive Director.

Nationally, states with programs specifically for students with disabilities are seeing significant demand by parents for evaluations of their children for special education services because special needs voucher programs draw down significantly higher voucher funding amounts. Districts reported to GAO that they have limited funds to pay for special education evaluation services and are prohibited from using other funds dedicated for private school students.

Two key federal education grant programs (Title I, which targets funds to low-income students and IDEA which funds students with disabilities) require public school districts to provide "equitable services," to eligible private school students.

In the 2014-15 school year Wisconsin was required to set aside \$68.36 million in federal funding for private voucher students.

You can find the GAO report here: <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-16-712>

*Disability Rights Wisconsin is the state's designated Protection and Advocacy Agency, charged with protecting the rights of individuals with disabilities and keeping individuals free from abuse and neglect.*

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