



Why Vouchers Hurt Students with Disabilities

By Susan Book

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My name is Susan Book and I'm the mom of an Autistic kid in a Wake County public middle school.

Disability families like mine in North Carolina face an impossible choice. State leadership here has the power to fund our schools, but is refusing. What that means for families like mine is that we don't always have a well-qualified special education teacher in every classroom. We don't always have resources and services that make access to general education classes possible.

Yet this voucher legislation only makes things more difficult. Marketed to families like mine, it is an unregulated marketplace of private schools that have no intention of accepting kids with disabilities. The schools require testing and an application process, some that straightforward say disabled children need not apply, others just hint by saying, we don't have services for you. We don't have special education teachers for you.

Churches are exempted from the Americans with Disabilities Act and therefore their schools are too. Some schools actually have upcharges for services and require therapists to be provided by a parent's private insurance. It's a bring your own occupational therapist to school situation plan! A one-on-one aid is \$15 dollars an hour, paid by the parent if even permitted by the school. The schools that do accept students with disabilities may only accept kids with certain disabilities or certain levels of disability and all of them charge more in general than other private schools. These specialized schools have long waiting lists and since they specialize in disability education, families like mine lose out on getting our kids an environment that is least restrictive and an education among typical peers.

Disability Families and Students fought for the right to go to public schools and regulations within those schools. We honor those families and students by continuing to fight. Private school vouchers are a huge step backward not forward for children with disabilities. We have laws and regulations in place in public schools to secure the rights of students with disabilities, yet when we don't fund public schools, we sabotage the rights of those children, often forcing them to private schools/services that underserve them. I want the choice to enroll my child in any school, in any zip code and know that my autistic child will get a sound basic education in North Carolina. I want Leandro funding and a real opportunity for every child, not school vouchers that discriminate legally against many student groups.

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