

Voucher schools have created a separate, unequal system



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A special-education teacher helps a student read a lunch menu at Audubon Middle School in Milwaukee in this file photo.

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Private voucher schools are failing Milwaukee children with disabilities. When these voucher schools ignore their obligations to educate and accommodate children with disabilities, they force Milwaukee Public Schools to pick up the slack - while giving MPS fewer resources to do so. Voucher schools' large-scale exclusion of children with disabilities has led to a segregated environment with a disproportionate share of children with disabilities attending MPS.

Indeed, if the state Legislature and governor have their way and expand the voucher program, the separation and exclusion of children with disabilities will only get worse.

That is why civil rights groups have filed the first systemic disability discrimination claim against a voucher program, at a time when well-financed pro-voucher lobbies are pumping money into voucher expansion efforts across the nation. The American Civil Liberties Union, the ACLU of Wisconsin and Disability Rights Wisconsin have asked the U.S. Department of Justice to investigate the voucher program and to shut down expansion as long as exclusion and segregation remain.

The ACLU and DRW have requested a federal investigation because of families like our clients. K.S., for example, who has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder but whose doctor has not prescribed medication, was told he would not be admitted to one voucher school unless his mother medicated him anyway. His brother, S.E., who needs speech therapy services, was discouraged from even applying to a voucher school and as of the time the complaint was filed had not been admitted - even though he applied in January.

Another voucher school expelled B.J. after she had an argument with another child and without the reasonable accommodations MPS would have to give her if she was in school there. The voucher school expulsion forced her back to MPS, which, of course, must accept and educate her. These are just examples of the children that the voucher schools will not serve - not the only ones.

Separate is not equal, but separate is exactly what is occurring in Milwaukee: Voucher schools educate about 20% of Milwaukee students, but a mere 1.6% of voucher students receive services due to disabilities. That compares to the more than 19.2% of MPS students who receive special education services. If the voucher program expands, it will take more non-disabled children and the segregation of children with disabilities in MPS will inevitably increase.

Voucher supporters claim that they really serve a greater number of children with learning disabilities, but they have no proven data to support their arguments. Besides, their own numbers say they are only serving half as many children with disabilities as MPS.

Voucher supporters also talk only about serving children with learning disabilities. Meanwhile, MPS serves children with a wide range of disabilities - such as deafness, autism, cognitive delays and mental illness, as well as profoundly disabled children whose

expenses the district also must absorb.

The vouchers were sold as a better alternative for all of Milwaukee's families. But the truth is that even though they do not serve students with disabilities, voucher schools are failing Milwaukee children. Testing data released this year shows that overall MPS performs better than voucher schools.

Realizing they are losing the argument on quality, voucher supporters now try to emphasize that they educate cheaply. But the voucher schools do not just get state and local tax dollars. In fact, one of the reasons we are asking for an investigation is that the voucher schools receive millions of dollars a year in federal money and services. The receipt of federal money obligates the private schools to comply with federal anti-discrimination laws.

This failure of voucher schools to serve children with disabilities has led to the segregation of children with disabilities within MPS, while reducing resources the public school system needs to educate all students. That's a separate - and unequal - system that cannot continue, let alone expand, in its current discriminatory form.

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