

FACT SHEET: GAO REPORT ON PRIVATE SCHOOL CHOICE

Background: Throughout the country, **taxpayer-funded vouchers** have been **subsidizing the cost of private school education for certain students**. In their report, GAO studied taxpayer-funded voucher programs across the country with a specific eye towards 4 states- Arizona, Indiana, Ohio, and Wisconsin.

- 1) Participation in voucher and education savings accounts (ESAs) **has more than doubled in the last 5 years from 70,000 students to 147,000 students**. Despite this, we know very little about the effectiveness and accountability of these programs.
- 2) **Taxpayer dollars going to voucher schools have more than doubled, from \$400 million five years ago to \$859 million today**. This growth comes from both expansion of existing programs and new programs.
- 3) **Some taxpayer funded voucher programs do not require that teachers meet minimum education requirements such as a bachelor's degree**. Often, the minimum qualifications for taxpayer funded voucher programs were different than those for public school teachers.
- 4) **Public schools must serve all students whereas many of the taxpayer-funded voucher schools cherry-pick students by using applicants' disciplinary history and academic achievements as considerations in the admissions process**. Some taxpayer-funded voucher schools referenced excluding applicants due to behaviors.
- 5) **Officials in the four states GAO visited said that vouchers complicate their efforts to provide students with equitable education services such as speech therapy or reading tutors**. Two of the four states expressed confusion about whether a student's participation in programs changed their eligibility for federally-required services.
- 6) **Nearly one-third of funding for Milwaukee's taxpayer funded voucher program comes DIRECTLY from Milwaukee Public Schools' state aid allocation**. In the '14-'15 school year, the Wisconsin Parental Choice program was funded with state general funds, however, the state's largest program; the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, uses a mix of state general funds and local property taxes.
- 7) **One taxpayer funded voucher school studied by GAO required all students in fourth grade and above to agree to follow a list of religious principles when applying to the school, blurring lines between the separation between church and state**. Officials from another taxpayer funded voucher school said students with the same religious affiliation as the school received priority during the admissions process.

- 8) A majority of the taxpayer-funded voucher programs and operating ESA's did not cap the tuition amounts that schools could charge students, meaning taxpayers could be footing the bill for incredibly expensive education costs for which we have no standardization or evidence of efficacy.
- 9) **In interviews conducted by the GAO, voucher schools reported enrolled students with disabilities leaving "because the student required more services that the school could provide."** *(According to Disability Rights Wisconsin (DRW), the Milwaukee Public School District reports high rates of students, particularly those with disabilities, returning to public school after initial admission to a voucher program. DRW has found that as voucher programs continue to expand in Milwaukee, the school district reported a significant overall increase in the number of students with disabilities, up to 30% of the student population, while the statewide percentage is about 14%)*
- 10) **While comparatively few students with disabilities are admitted into taxpayer-funded voucher programs, federal investment through the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA) are being used to fund taxpayer-funded voucher schools' services, forcing public schools to stretch their dollars further.** *(According to DRW, in total, there are 250 students with disabilities attending private schools in Milwaukee, more than 60,000 in Milwaukee Public Schools demonstrating a remarkably low number of students with disabilities attending taxpayer funded voucher schools.)*
- 11) The GAO report documents how increased demand for federal funds for services in private schools has affected the quality and amount of services that public schools can provide for their students. **One public school district indicated it was no longer able to pay for additional services or develop programs for those public school students who were most academically at risk.**
- 12) **There is significant need for the Department of Education to clarify funding streams, standards, and services offered by taxpayer funded voucher programs to ensure taxpayers are not footing the bill for programs that aren't benefiting our children.**