



For Immediate Release

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Transparency and Evidence Lacking In Many Special Education Voucher Programs

WASHINGTON, D.C., Oct 31, 2017— A growing number of states are enacting special education voucher programs for students with disabilities despite a lack of compelling evidence that they actually benefit students and families, according to *Little Evidence and Big Consequences: Understanding Special Education Voucher Programs*, a new report from the Center on Education Policy (CEP) at the George Washington University. Currently, ten states offer publicly funded vouchers to special education students to attend private schools, and an estimated 43,000 special education students are using these vouchers.

CEP's new report details the growth and characteristics of state special education voucher programs while emphasizing that the evidence base on their impact, effectiveness, and quality is small, dated, and heavily biased. The report identifies major questions and concerns about these programs that have yet to be fully addressed by researchers or policymakers.

"Many special education voucher programs operate outside of traditional state and federal accountability systems," said Maria Ferguson, CEP's Executive Director. "That, coupled with a lack of transparency, can make it difficult for parents and others to fully understand the potential consequences that go along with participating in these programs."

For example, CEP's report notes, most special education voucher programs do not require voucher-receiving private schools to fulfill all the requirements of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, including the conditions in the student's IEP (Individualized Education Program). And no state except Utah even requires voucher-receiving private schools to spell out for parents the specific services they will provide to students.

Special education voucher programs also have different criteria regarding how much the voucher payments are worth, how payments are made, and which students with disabilities are eligible to participate. "The rules vary widely by state

and most provide little if any oversight over quality and accountability,” said Matthew Braun, the report’s primary author.

To provide the kinds of evidence needed for parents and policymakers to make good decisions about special education vouchers, CEP calls for further research and data on their impact on both students and schools. Among the questions in need of answers are the following:

- To what degree are states conducting oversight to ensure that participating students with disabilities are receiving a quality education addressing their needs?
- Do states with special education voucher programs adequately inform parents of the due process rights and protections they may lose when using the voucher for child with a disability?
- Are special education voucher-users representative of the state’s school-age demographics and family income levels?
- Are participating private schools accepting a spectrum of students with disabilities?
- How do the educational outcomes of voucher students compare with their public-school counterparts?
- Are voucher students being educated in the same classrooms as their non-disabled peers?
- What is the financial impact of the vouchers on public schools in the state?

Little Evidence and Big Consequences: Understanding Special Education Voucher Programs can be downloaded from www.cep-dc.org. An appendix with tables comparing the features of various state special education vouchers is also available on the CEP web site.

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Based in Washington, D.C., and founded in 1995, the Center on Education Policy at The George Washington University is a national advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. The Center does not represent special interests. Instead, it helps citizens make sense of conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create conditions that will lead to better public schools.