



# Testimony

## Scholarships for Special Needs Students

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Good afternoon. I am Brooke Dollens Terry, an education policy analyst at the Texas Public Policy Foundation. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

Out of the 4.6 million students in Texas public schools, approximately 487,000 students are students with special needs. This means roughly 10 percent of all public school students in Texas are classified as special education students.<sup>1</sup>

As you know, every student with special needs is unique. One student may have a mild learning disability while another student may have multiple disabilities including mental retardation and severe physical disabilities. Each student deserves to have their individual needs met.

Unfortunately, this is not the case for many students with special needs in public schools. Teachers with special education expertise are in short supply in Texas causing special education certification to be classified a critical shortage area by the Texas Education Agency. Special needs students that are mainstreamed may be taught by a teacher with little or no special education training.

Last year, the Texas Education Agency did a survey of parents with special needs children to determine the quality of special education services. The survey revealed that only 40 percent of parents said their child's teacher "sometimes" understood their child's needs. Only 80 percent of parents surveyed said their concerns and recommendations are "considered" by the ARD (Admission, Review and Dismissal) committee in the develop-

ment of their child's individual education plan (IEP).<sup>2</sup> Students whose needs go unmet have little recourse in the current system. Parents can hire a lawyer and battle with the school district, move to a different school district, or pay for their child to attend private school.

Consensus is growing around the country that students with special needs require individualized education services that not all traditional public schools are equipped to provide. In 1999, the state of Florida passed the McKay Scholarship Program for Students with Disabilities. The scholarships allow children with special needs and their parents to choose the school that best meets their educational needs including public or private schools. The McKay program is the largest program in the country offering choice to students with special needs.<sup>3</sup>

Research on the McKay scholarships by the Manhattan Institute found extraordinarily high parental satisfaction, reduction in student behavior problems and harassment, and improvement in academic performance.<sup>4</sup> For example, 92.7 percent of parents with McKay scholarships were satisfied or very satisfied with their McKay schools compared to only 32.7 percent of parents being satisfied with their government-assigned public schools. Behavior problems in school decreased from 40.3 percent in their assigned public school to only 18.8 percent in their McKay school. Students with special needs were "victimized far less by other students because of their disabilities in McKay schools. In assigned public schools, 46.8 percent [of students] were bothered often and 24.7 percent [of students] were physically assaulted, while

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in McKay schools 5.3 percent [of students] were bothered often and 6 percent [of students] were assaulted.” Students received more needed services in McKay schools than in their assigned public schools. Eighty-six percent of students received all the services they required versus 30.2 percent of students in traditional public schools.

The cost of the scholarship varies with the student’s needs and the cost to educate them. Thus, students with more severe disabilities have the chance of receiving a larger scholarship than students with milder disabilities.<sup>5</sup> The scholarships ranged in cost from \$5,039 to \$21,907 with an average of \$7,206 during the 2006-2007 school year.<sup>6</sup> Only a portion of the money used to educate special needs stu-

dents follows that student to the school of their choice. The scholarships are funded with state funds leaving the federal and local funds in the public school.<sup>7</sup>

Increasing numbers of students are taking advantage of McKay scholarships, beginning with two students in the 1999-2000 school year, increasing to 970 students the following year, and expanding to 19,439 students in the 2007-2008 school year.<sup>8</sup> Growth seems to be primarily from word of mouth as there is no annual requirement for parents to be notified of this option. Florida does not have a cap on enrollment in the McKay scholarship program. The number of schools accepting the scholarship increased to 824 private schools accepting the scholarship last year. ★

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Texas Education Agency, Division of Performance Reporting, “Pocket Edition: Texas Public School Statistics 2006-2007” (Dec. 2007) <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/pocketed/2007/pocketed0607.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Texas Education Agency, Division of IDEA Coordination, “State Performance Plan: 2005-2010” (Feb. 2008) 11, <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/special.ed/spp/TX-SPP2006.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Goodman, Geoffery, “Study Finds Public School Students with Special Needs Benefit from Vouchers.” School Choice Digest, Alliance for School Choice (June 2008) 7, [http://www.allianceforschoolchoice.org/UploadedFiles/ResearchResources/SCD\\_07222008.pdf](http://www.allianceforschoolchoice.org/UploadedFiles/ResearchResources/SCD_07222008.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Greene, Jay P. Ph.D. And Greg Forster, PhD. “Vouchers for Special Education Students: An Evaluation of Florida’s McKay Scholarship Program.” Manhattan Institute (June 2003) [http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr\\_38.htm](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_38.htm)

<sup>5</sup> Greene, Jay P. Ph.D. And Marcus Winters, “The Effect of Special Education Vouchers on Public School Achievement: Evidence from Florida’s McKay Scholarship Program.” Manhattan Institute (Apr. 2008) [http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr\\_52.htm](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_52.htm)

<sup>6</sup> Greene, Jay P. Ph.D. quoting Florida Department of Education 2006-2007 data in The Effect of Special Education Vouchers on Public School Achievement: Evidence from Florida’s McKay Scholarship Program.

<sup>7</sup> “The Promise of Special Needs Scholarships” Alliance for School Choice, 13, [http://www.allianceforschoolchoice.org/UploadedFiles/ResearchResources/specialNEEDS\\_07232008.pdf](http://www.allianceforschoolchoice.org/UploadedFiles/ResearchResources/specialNEEDS_07232008.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Greene, Jay P. Ph.D. And Marcus Winters, “The Effect of Special Education Vouchers on Public School Achievement: Evidence from Florida’s McKay Scholarship Program,” Manhattan Institute (Apr. 2008) [http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr\\_52.htm](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_52.htm)

<sup>9</sup> Goodman, Geoffery, “Study Finds Public School Students with Special Needs Benefit from Vouchers.” School Choice Digest, Alliance for School Choice (June 2008) 7, [http://www.allianceforschoolchoice.org/UploadedFiles/ResearchResources/SCD\\_07222008.pdf](http://www.allianceforschoolchoice.org/UploadedFiles/ResearchResources/SCD_07222008.pdf).

