A False Choice:

Why Voucher Programs are Wrong for Students with Disabilities
Dear CEC Member,

For decades, we have advocated for the rights of children and youth with disabilities. Together, as a special education community, our journey started nearly 40-years ago with the passage of what we now call the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), legislation which has encouraged society move past its once-held notion that individuals with disabilities could not be educated.

But now, there is a growing movement at the Federal and State level that seeks to undermine the right to special education that IDEA affords, all under the guise of helping students with disabilities. **Voucher programs – policies that allow for public education funding to be used on private school tuition – are on the rise.**

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**CEC opposes voucher programs for 8 reasons:**

1. **Vouchers Undermine and Contradict Civil Rights Laws:** The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act were passed to ensure equal access and protections that may not be adhered to in private schools.

2. **Absence of Necessary Accountability:** Private schools do not adhere to the same federal, state, and local laws and regulations as public schools, particularly regarding providing special education and related services.

3. **No Guarantee of FAPE:** Vouchers fail to guarantee an education at no cost to a student’s family.

4. **Families Must Opt-Out of IDEA Protections:** To participate in voucher programs, families relinquish their IDEA rights, in most states.

5. **Segregation within the Private School:** Private schools do not have to educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment, which may lead to in-school segregation.

6. **No Guarantee of Equal Access:** Private schools establish enrollment/retention criteria which leads to fewer students with disabilities – particularly students with more significant needs – served.

7. **Promotes Re-Segregation Rather Than Diversity:** Vouchers can facilitate racial, ethnic, economic, religious, gender and disability segregation.

8. **Public Education Funds Should Fund Public, Not Private Education**

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*School vouchers, also referred to as opportunity scholarships, are state-funded scholarships that pay for students to attend private school rather than public school.*

(Source: National Conference of State Legislatures)
Quick Facts About Voucher Programs

- **Voucher programs** – also called scholarships – allow public education funding to pay for students to attend secular or non-secular private schools.

- **The first voucher program** started in 1989 in Milwaukee School District; and in 2001 Florida became the first state to offer private school vouchers to students with disabilities.

- **9 States & the District of Columbia** have voucher programs exclusively for or include students with disabilities; Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Utah.

- **70% of Americans oppose** private school vouchers (45th Annual PDK/Gallup Poll)

- **246,000 students** received a voucher in 2012-2013.

- **$1 Billion in public education** funding is diverted to private schools per year.

For Students with Disabilities, Vouchers Mean:

- Public education funding “follows the student” but special education protections do not.

- No guarantee to receive special education and related services.

- Families must opt-out of IDEA’s protections, mediation, and due process rights.

- Lax accountability to public.

- Absence of accountability measures for student achievement.

- No requirement to create or implement IEP.

- Increased potential for in-school segregation as students with disabilities do not have to be educated in the ‘least restrictive environment’.

- Limited access as private schools can restrict enrollment and choose to expel students for behavior/academic performance.

- Varying requirements for special educators (may or may not have to have certification).

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5 Actions You Can Take to Oppose Voucher Programs

1. Familiarize Yourself with Current/Pending Voucher Programs in Your State
   Knowing whether your state has – or is considering – voucher legislation and the focus of the program is key! The National Conference of State Legislatures is a non-partisan resource with a wealth of information: http://www.ncsl.org/research/education/school-choice-vouchers.aspx

2. Connect with Your Local CEC State Unit and/or Division to Develop an Action Plan
   A collective voice against vouchers sends a powerful message. Work with your CEC state unit/division to inform other special educators; create a coalition of other like-minded organizations (i.e. NEA, AFT); and work to get the word out!

3. Inform Your Federal, State and Local Policymakers About the Negative Impact of Vouchers on Students with Disabilities
   Help policymakers make informed decisions about voucher programs! Share CEC resources during in-person meetings, email communications, or social media outreach. Don’t underestimate your important constituent voice!

4. Educate & Engage Your Colleagues
   Tell your colleagues, friends and family about vouchers as a growing trend throughout the country and encourage them to become involved!

5. Use CEC’s Policy Resources to Support Your Advocacy Outreach
   Need to know who your elected officials are and how to contact them/their staff? Need a one-pager that illustrates the negative impact of vouchers on students with disabilities? Check out CEC’s voucher website: http://www.cec.sped.org/Policy-and-Advocacy/More-Issues/Vouchers