

Vouchers meet special needs

But new scholarship programs cuts into public school funds

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Hundreds of Ohio students who have special needs are getting help paying for private schooling for the first time this school year.

Ohio's new Jon Peterson Special Needs Scholarship will initially help pay for the private education of 1,369 students, with more expected to apply this fall.

The voucher program makes millions of dollars in state money available to special-needs students to pay tuition and fees at private schools or at special education providers other than their home public school district.

Ohio is one of eight states nationwide to offer such comprehensive, state-funded scholarships. Ohio already has a scholarship for children with autism, but parents of students with other special needs have for years sought a voucher program of their own.

Parents in the Cincinnati Public Schools district filed more scholarship applications than any district in the state – 199. Applications from the four-county Greater Cincinnati region totaled 498, with one special education school, the Springer School and Center in O'Bryonville, enrolling the most scholarship recipients in the state – 118 of its 190 students.

Education “is not one size fits all,” said Cheryl Bowshier, a manager at School Choice Ohio, a Columbus-based advocacy group. “It depends on the needs of the child. Who better to decide that than the parent?”

But with choice comes cost.

Opponents say the Peterson scholarship draws away state money from public school districts for each child who transfers to a private school. Many public schools also lose money on private school students who use the scholarship because it cuts into state reimbursements.

“School districts are losing money for kids they never had,” said Stephen Dyer, Education Policy Fellow at Innovation Ohio, a progressive think tank. “Regardless of what you think about vouchers, the way they're funded is really a cause of concern.”

The amount of each scholarship is deducted from state aid the districts receive. The state is supposed to recalculate its aid to the district but public school supporters say those adjustments don't make up for how much many districts lose with voucher students.

Add to that autism research that says private schools tend to accept the less expensive special needs students, and districts are left with less money to help more severely disabled students, said Piet van Lier, communications director at Policy Matters Ohio.

“This is another blow to districts that are being forced by the state to educate our neediest children with less money,” he said.

Cincinnati Public, for instance, said that only 15 of its Peterson voucher recipients are switching to a private school. Most of the other recipients live in the district but already attend private schools or are kindergartners, said Pat Cleveland, CPS' manager of non-public schools special education services.

“It's really not a scholarship. It's really a transfer of funds from our district to the non-public provider,” she said, adding that it may cost CPS \$1.25 million to \$2 million this year.

The way it works Funds follow the child

Named after the former state representative from Delaware, Ohio, who championed it, the Jon Peterson scholarship awards up to \$20,000 a year for all or part of the expenses at private schools, varying those funds based on the type of disability.

Students can apply and renew annually through their high school graduation. The next application window closes Nov. 15.

Unlike Ohio's Ed Choice vouchers or the Cleveland scholarship, Peterson scholarships are not limited by family income or the quality of public school choices. Most special-needs students would qualify – whether they attend public or private schools or are home-schooled – as long as they have an Individual Education Program (IEP) from their home school district, spelling out services and educational goals for each student's needs.

Federal law requires public schools to evaluate and provide a “free appropriate education” to any student with special needs in their district, regardless of cost to the district.

But parents haven't always been happy with public schools' special education offerings. Since 2009, Greater Cincinnati parents have filed 52 complaints and prompted 47 due process hearings over special needs issues at local public schools, according to state education databases.

Jenna Martin of Covedale was not unhappy with the kindergarten education her son Jackson received at the nearby public school, she said. But she wants him to attend the smaller, St. Teresa of Avila Catholic school in her parish, to get more hands-on attention and keep him around his close friends.

Jackson has Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder, some speech and writing challenges, and a sensory disorder in which parts of his brain fail to properly interpret sensory information. For

him, a typical day could devolve into confusion, over-stimulation and emotional withdrawal, Jenna said. Even loud noises can overwhelm him.

“If you were to spin yourself around and then try to function normally, that’s how he is all the time,” she said.

The scholarship “gives people the choice to do what’s best for their child,” Martin said.

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