

Why GAO Did This Study

Growth of voucher and ESA programs has drawn attention to the ways states ensure accountability and transparency to the public and prospective parents. With over half of voucher and ESA programs specifically designed for students with disabilities, there is interest in the information parents receive about special education services and rights when enrolling in a choice program. GAO was asked to examine these topics in more depth.

This report examines (1) academic, administrative, and financial accountability mechanisms in private choice programs; (2) information available to the public and families on private choice programs and participating schools; and (3) how parents of students with disabilities are informed about changes in rights when enrolling in private choice programs. GAO analyzed information from all voucher and ESA programs operating in January 2017 and interviewed officials from Education, national groups, and six of the largest private choice programs. GAO reviewed websites of a nationally representative sample of private voucher schools, and worked with private choice groups and national organizations to contact families that recently interacted with a choice program. GAO interviewed all 17 families that responded.

What GAO Recommends

Congress should consider requiring states to notify parents/guardians about changes in federal special education rights when a parent moves a child from public to private school. In addition, GAO recommends Education review and correct inaccurate IDEA-related information provided by states. Education generally agreed with our recommendation.

View [GAO-18-94](#). For more information, contact Jacqueline M. Nowicki at (617) 788-0580 or nowickij@gao.gov.

PRIVATE SCHOOL CHOICE

Federal Actions Needed to Ensure Parents Are Notified About Changes in Rights for Students with Disabilities

What GAO Found

States include different academic, administrative, and financial accountability mechanisms in their voucher and education savings account (ESA) programs—programs that use public funds for private school educational expenses (see figure). Of the 27 programs operating in January 2017, most had academic and administrative accountability mechanisms for participating schools, such as academic testing requirements (18 of 27) or health and safety requirements (25 of 27). In addition, 15 of 27 programs required schools to demonstrate financial soundness and 8 of 27 programs required annual financial audits.

Key Academic, Administrative, and Financial Accountability Mechanisms in Private School Choice Programs



Source: GAO analysis of information from private school choice reports and national stakeholders. | GAO-18-94

Almost all of the 27 private school choice program websites provide a directory of participating schools and some provide guidance on selecting schools. However, GAO estimates that no more than half of all schools participating in any type of voucher program mention students with disabilities anywhere on their websites, according to GAO's review of a nationally generalizable sample of websites of private schools in voucher programs. Further, GAO estimates that no more than 53 percent of private schools in voucher programs designed for students with disabilities provide disability-related information on their websites.

GAO found private school choice programs inconsistently provide information on changes in rights and protections under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) when parents move a child with a disability from public to private school. In 2001, the U.S. Department of Education (Education) strongly encouraged states and school districts to notify parents of these changes, but according to Education, IDEA does not provide it with statutory authority to require this notification. According to GAO's review of information provided by private school choice programs, and as confirmed by program officials, in school year 2016-17, 83 percent of students enrolled in a program designed specifically for students with disabilities were in a program that provided either no information about changes in IDEA rights or provided information that Education confirmed contained inaccuracies about these changes. Officials from national stakeholder groups, private choice programs, and Education told GAO that some parents do not understand that certain key IDEA rights and protections—such as discipline procedures and least restrictive environment requirements—change when parents move their child from public to private school. Ensuring that quality information is communicated consistently and accurately to parents can help address potential misunderstanding about changes in federal special education rights.