

Families as Allies  
840 E. River Place, Suite 500  
Jackson, MS 39202



## Families Say Vote No On Special Education Voucher Bills

Dear Senator,

Special education in Mississippi has major systemic challenges and a great deal of improvement is needed. Families, advocates, mental health professionals, policy makers and elected officials must all unite behind fixing it for everyone, not just a select few. **While their sponsors may be well intentioned, we believe that Senate Bill 2325 and House Bill 765 will not fix the problems for 99% of our children with special needs. That is why Families as Allies does not support these bills, and here are our reasons:**

1. **Parents and their children will lose all of their protections under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) when they accept vouchers.** *They will have no legal recourse under these bills. Parents and their children will be abandoned.*
2. **Private schools as defined in the legislation have no legal obligation to accept children who have received a voucher into their school.** *They will be legally able to discriminate on the basis of almost any criteria: race, gender, income, religion, disability or need. In other states, these kinds of voucher programs have increased the disparities between white and African American students.*
3. **Exactly what are the funding limitations of the bills, and where will the funding be taken from?** *As written, the bills potentially make eligible over 55,000 children and their families. Yet the sponsors of the bills have cited a \$3 million appropriation as a funding limit, although that amount is not mentioned anywhere in the bills.*
4. **Who will get access to the program, and how will they be equitably selected?** *If there is a \$3 million funding limit, as the sponsors suggest, and we accept that the MAEP base cost funding per child is about \$6,000, how will the approximately 500 children and their families be chosen? The bills are contradictory on this, saying both that there will be a lottery if there are more families than can be funded, and also that the program will be on a first come, first served basis. Both statements cannot be true. What will be done to ensure that access to the program will be fair and equitable, and that families that are denied access into the program do not take legal action?*
5. **The bills provide little oversight of the private schools, creating what is essentially an honor system for the program. In Florida, this led to disaster, or what an award-winning newspaper expose called “an educational catastrophe”. That’s not good enough for our children!** *How will MDE be able to conduct meaningful oversight of these schools? Will MDE’s funding be increased due to their increased oversight workload? There is no guarantee that unscrupulous schools won’t take advantage of parents and children in need, and that these children won’t end up back in the public school system.*

The State Chapter of the  
Federation of Families

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Read this: (<http://www.miaminewtimes.com/2011-12-08/news/new-times-mckay-scholarship-expose-prompts-reform-of-a-billion-dollar-educational-catastrophe/>)

6. **We need greater enforcement of IDEA law in the state, not a voucher system for 1% of the population.** Most of the accommodations and placements that parents who have spoken out in favor of this bill want are possible under IDEA, especially when schools work together with parents in the best interest of children. IDEA includes monitoring and accountability provisions so we can make sure funds help children.
7. **The amount per student allocated for vouchers is not enough.** It is likely that the highest-need children will be kicked out and will end up back in public school (but less prepared). Many of the highest need children in the Florida McKay scholarship program (the one that most often gets cited as a model) are back in public school because of this reason. See above for link.
8. **It is unclear what limits there are to the voucher program.** According to the bills, both students with IEPs and students with 504 designations are eligible. There are 53,731 children in grades K-12 with IEPs in Mississippi (<http://www.mde.k12.ms.us/docs/sped-11-12-district-data-profiles/statewide.pdf?sfvrsn=5>) and approximately 2000 with the 504 designation. The general funds that are will drain resources from other systems that help our children, like Mental Health and Vocational Rehabilitation.
9. **Families as Allies urges you to vote NO on SB 2325.** Let's work together on solutions that will make special education better for 100% of the families, not just 1%.

As senators, you must hold the education system accountable for following federal laws that protect children with disabilities and provide for their education. And you should scrutinize expenditures, *including how much the state spends on legal fees fighting children and their families over access to special education resources.*

The federal **Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)** mandates –

- Early identification
- Parental involvement
- Individualized educational plans using proven interventions
- Instruction by highly qualified teachers
- School Accountability
- Transition planning so that children can become successful adults

**IDEA** is NOT being consistently followed in our state. **Vouchers are not the answer. Following IDEA is**

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